



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

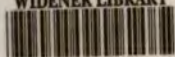
We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

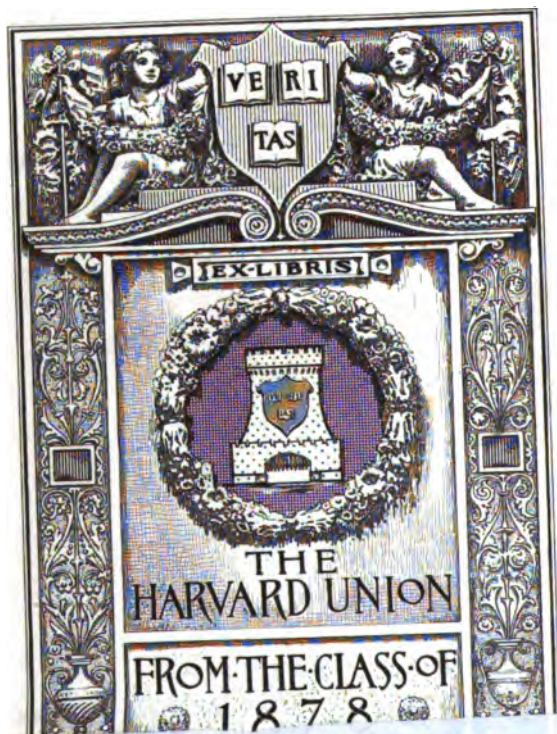
About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

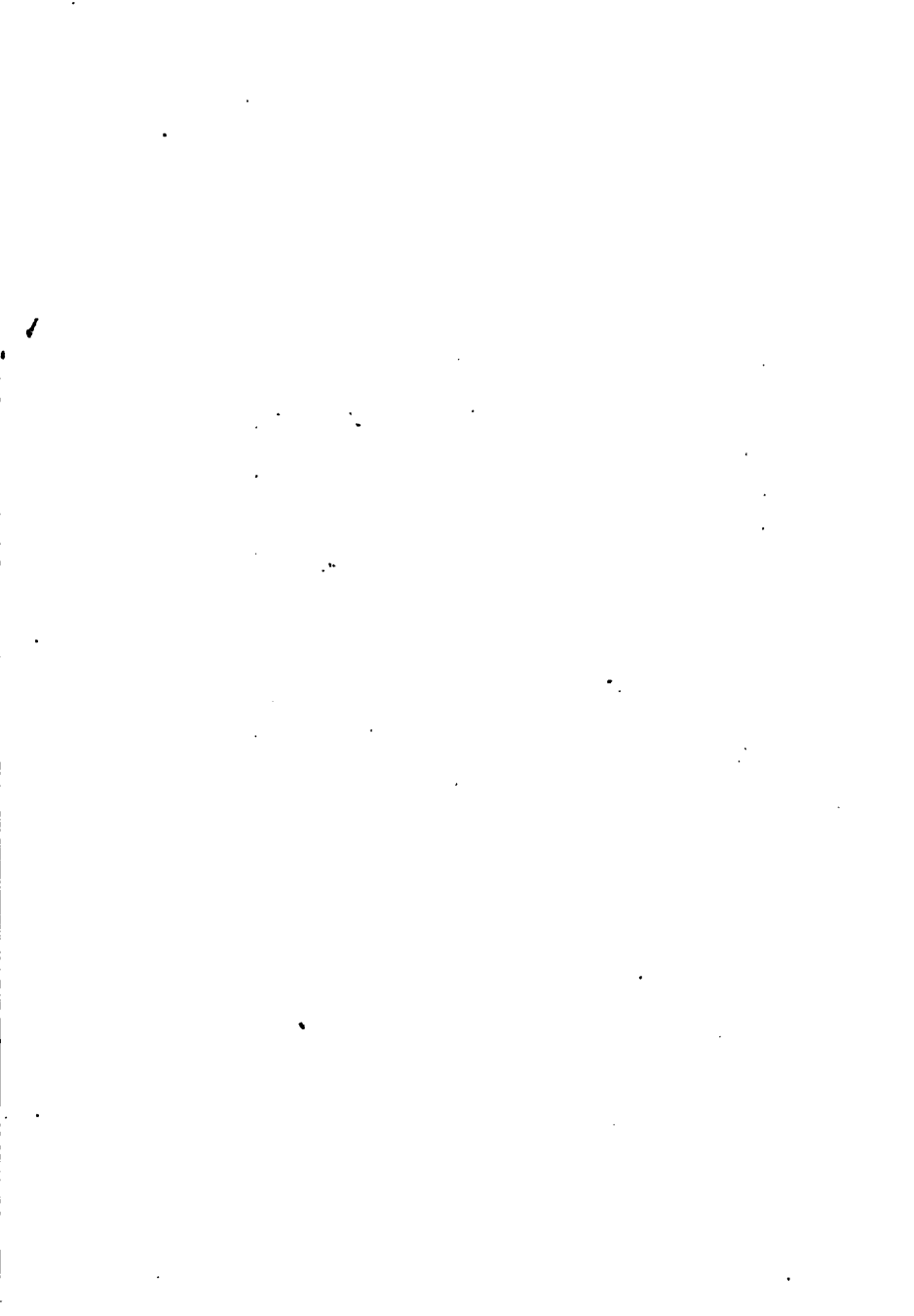
WIDENER LIBRARY



HX DILE U



TRANSFERRED
TO
COLLEGE
LIBRARY



NOVELS BY HENRY G. AIKMAN

THE GROPER

ZELL

° Zell: a Novel
by Henry G. Aikman



New York Alfred • A • Knopf
1921

COPYRIGHT, 1921, BY
AL 793.6.20 ALFRED A. KNOFF, Inc.

V

Published, February, 1921
Second Printing, March, 1921
Third Printing, March, 1921

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY
TRANSFERRED FROM THE
HARVARD UNION LIBRARY

Jan 16, 1939

TO
MY OWN BELOVED FAMILY,
*Sympathetic, affectionate, forbearing—happily different
from The Zells*



CONTENTS

I THE ZELL FAMILY

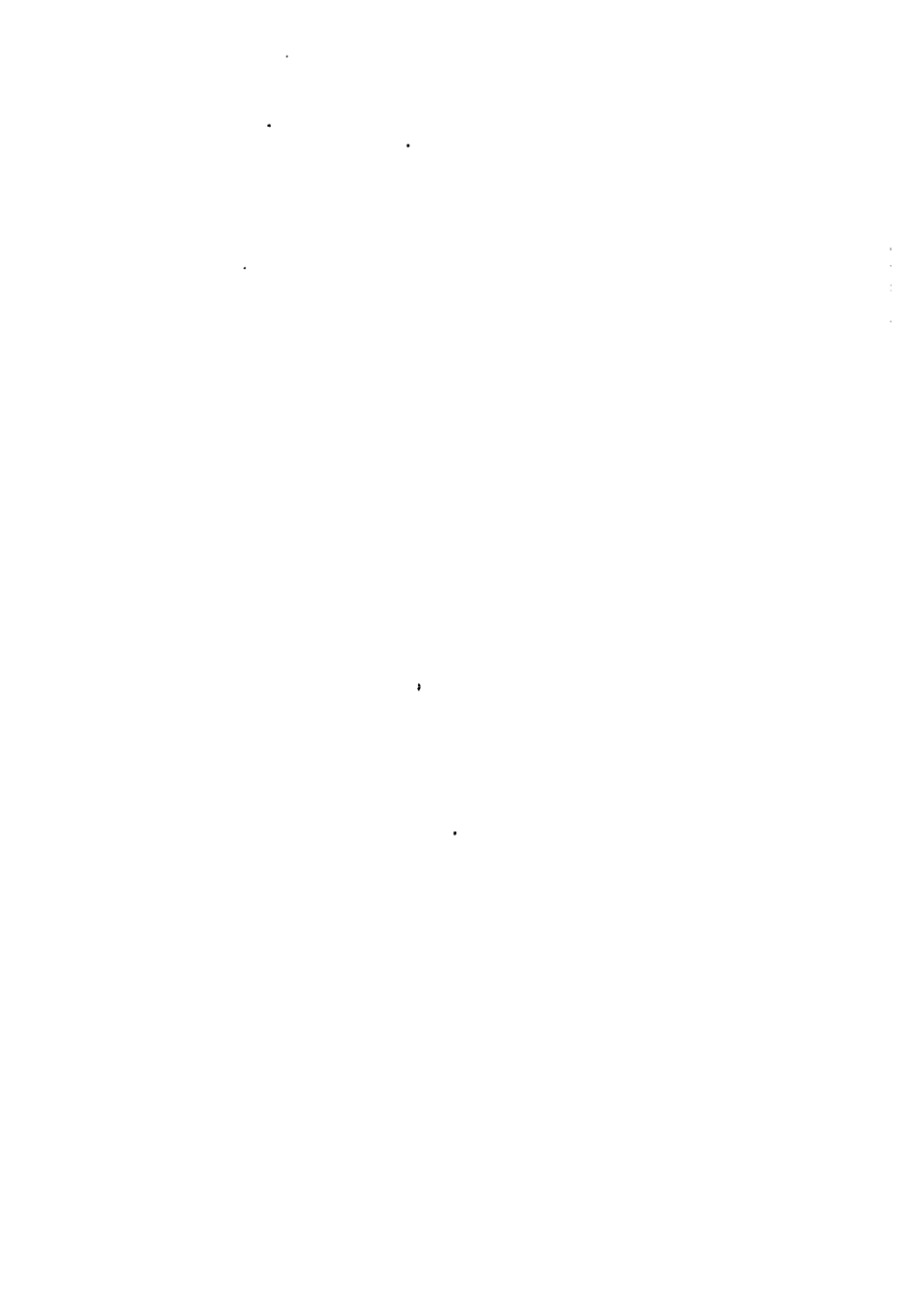
1. The Zell Microcosm, 11
2. The Divorce, 76
3. Obit Herman Zell, 117

II MARRIAGE

1. At Twenty-Three, 137
2. Ruby, 194
3. Avery, Junior, 229

III THE EVOCATION

1. Stagnation, 263
2. The Tertium Quid, 283
3. The Choice, 306



I. The Zell Family

Chapter One: The Zell Microcosm

I

ALREADY, at the ponderous age of nine, Avery was unshakably persuaded that he possessed a remarkable voice; and therefore he joined fervidly in the song:

You muss not play on Sunday, Sunday, Sunday,
You muss not play on Sunday,
God's holy day of rest.

Miss Mayhew, his teacher, looked toward him. Gratified, he strained his voice to its loudest. Every one in the chapel should hear his clarion tones — the superintendent himself, and the red-faced cornetist on the platform.

It was a good world. He felt very self-righteous in his Sunday clothes. The bath and liver pill his mother had given him the night before added an ethereal quality. Outdoors, the day was celestial; the sun shone down brightly upon the fast melting March snow. There would be excellent snowball "packing."

A swift doubt adumbrated his pride. Really, he was too old to be singing children's songs in the primary department. A little ashamed, he looked around covetously at the older children of the secondary classes and finished the chorus perfunctorily:

But you can play on Monday, Toosday, Wednesday,
And Thursday, Friday, Saturday,
Till Sunday comes again.

His eye halted on his sister Winifred, a row ahead of him to the left, among the mere infants of eight years. She sat with the other little girls, dressed like them in starched white organdy, yet set off from them by the splendour of her new pink hair ribbons, her necklace of imitation coral beads, her immaculate coiffure of straw-coloured ringlets, and by the general brilliancy of her toilet. Avery resented her air of self-conscious superiority, just as he at all times resented his mother's obvious favouritism of her. Just now, she was listening, with critical absorption, to the rendition by a six-year-old prodigy of the Twenty-third Psalm. Whenever Winifred was really interested, she drew back her upper lip with a sapient look of suspended judgment, and thereby exposed to the fullest her protruding front teeth.

"Just like a squirrel," Avery silently jeered. His new sense of grievance focused on his sister. "Old big nose!"

His moodiness persisted even when he stood, with the rest of the primary department, and sang the next song on the program:

Tobacco! Tobacco!
I *hate* that word — Tobacco!
Tobacco! Tobacco!
I *hate* that word — Tobacco.

He was the only boy in the primary department

who could sing as loud as the teachers — and if his starched Eton collar weren't so tight, he could sing ten times louder.

The superintendent let them go then. Avery dashed through the vacant and darkened church and out of the front door, wriggling into his chinchilla reefer on the way. Once outdoors, he ran two full blocks without stopping. Then he looked around for his sister.

"Where'd she go to?" he demanded conscientiously. "Well, I can't wait all day for her."

He came to a smooth stretch of ice on the stone sidewalk, and with a preliminary dash, slid over it luxuriously. All at once he slackened his pace. Was it wrong to slide across an inviting piece of slippery ice on Sunday? Well, he had to get across the ice somehow; it was right in his way. Now if the ice were on the other side of the street—that would be wrong.

Sunday school was a funny place. That tobacco song, for instance. His father smoked cigars all day long — in fact, he made cigars for a living. He could roll more cigars in a day than any other cigar-maker in the city. Was his father a sinner? He would have to ask his mother.

He turned a corner and came into view of the brick drugstore, and the flat above it where his family lived. In a vacant lot ahead of him, he beheld the three Gallagher boys tossing a premature baseball through the chilly air.

Leo Gallagher hailed him joyously.

"Here's Zelly," he yelled to Tom and Michael Gallagher. "Scrub One!"

"Scrub Two!" "Scrub Three!" echoed the other youthful Gallaghers.

Avery's thoughts divagated to the top drawer of the white dresser in his room over the drugstore. Two weeks before, in the advertising columns of *Harper's Round Table*, he had come upon an alluring advertisement:

CAN YOU PITCH A BAFFLING OUT CURVE?

Whether you can or cannot, you will want the greatest baseball discovery of the age, our new **BASEBALL CURVER**. Attaches to your fingers. So small no one can detect it. The other boys will be mystified at the wonderful "outs," "ins" and "drops" you can pitch with this little marvel. They will wonder how you do it. Send 10 cents today and we will mail you the **CURVER**, together with a copy of our latest booklet, "How Roy Johnson won the Game for the Rusie Club."

Avery had wheedled a dime from his mother, and dispatched it post-haste to the inventor of the "greatest baseball discovery." Yesterday afternoon, the "Curver" had finally arrived, too late for a practical demonstration of its merits. It proved to be a minute bit of enamelled tin, cylindrical in form to slide snugly down the middle finger, and with two sharp projecting edges, fashioned to impinge incisively into the baseball's leather cover. Reluctantly he had inhumed it in the drawer, against the first warm day. Now his tender thoughts resurrected it. He visualized himself

baffling the mystified Leo Gallagher with stupendous "out-drops."

Then the melancholy truth displaced this intriguing picture. It was Sunday. He was not like the Gallagher boys. A mysteriously different set of precepts guided his destiny.

"You *muss* not play on Sunday."

Instinctively he looked up toward the front windows of the flat above the drugstore. Even as his eyes reached their goal, the lace curtains perceptibly palpitated, were slightly parted in the middle; and there emerged from the low visibility of the darkened interior the enormous nose, the unwinking grey eyes of his mother. From her rocking chair in the parlour, Mrs. Zell's watchful scrutiny enfiladed the entire block. To Avery, those front windows symbolized an unwinking, staring, Grey Eye. It was like his conscience, or his shadow, never to be run away from. Winifred he could evade, but never that Omniscient Eye. From her conning tower, Agatha Zell beheld not only her son's derelictions, but also the short-comings of her neighbours. Behind the ambush of the lace curtains, she lay in wait, like a spider, for the choicest frailties of Beech Street. For example, the mere appearance of the neighbourhood shrew, Mrs. Griffiths, on her front doorstep sufficed to produce a discernible titillation of those curtains. And if Angus Griffiths simultaneously slouched around the corner, homeward bound in quest of his daily uxorial flagellation, the curtains would shake violently and eventually give place to the parrot-like visage of Avery's mother.

And now a second familiar phenomenon obtruded — the maternal forefinger, crooked imperiously.

"Can't," he quenched the avid Gallagher boys. "T's Sunday."

He crossed the cobble-stones of the street, hurried past the fascinating red and blue urns on the windows of Donnelly's Drug Store, opened the street door just beyond and stamped up the narrow, steep staircase.

"Avery, come here this instant!" his mother called. She had not left her vantage seat.

"I don't want you to even talk to those Gallagher boys on Sunday."

He let her help him off with his reefer.

"But, mamma — why can't I?"

"Because they're wicked," she explained. "They play ball on Sunday. Just like all those Catholics — they go to that heathenish early mass, and then they think they can do anything they want the rest of the day."

Avery reflected silently on this score.

"It's a disgrace to the neighbourhood," Mrs. Zell concluded.

"But can I play with them other days?" He could not help dwelling on the manifest advantages of Catholicism.

"Yes — I guess so," said Agatha. "But you must tell them you don't believe in playing on Sunday. Now let me see if you can remember the Golden Text."

The sudden appearance of Winifred spared Avery this mnemonic ordeal.

"He ran away and left me," Winifred promptly

whimpered, her round brown eyes full of angry tears. Whenever she wept, her large nose reddened and became more conspicuous than ever.

Mrs. Zell confronted Avery with his guilt. But the boy was staring transfixed over his mother's head toward the wall behind her. Mrs. Zell turned around sharply.

"Oh, *that!*" she deprecated. Winifred's tears were somewhere absorbed. They all forgot her grievance.

Above the upright piano hung a new and resplendent chromolithograph in a baroque gilt frame.

"It's 'Christ Before Pilate,'" announced Mrs. Zell with pride.

The scarlet robe of Pilate, the blue mantle of the stern Christ, enchanted Avery. A leering face stood out from the mob held at bay by a soldier's spear.

Agatha Zell's complacent accents continued. "And just to think! It didn't cost us a cent — except for the frame. I got it free with two hundred Queen Mab Soap wrappers."

It was true. She had been saving wrappers for more than a year in order to obtain this artistic and religious gem. To tell the truth she had discounted the family's soap requirements for months to come; in the kitchen lay a whole unused box of "Queen Mab," each cake denuded of its wrapper.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Agatha raptly challenged.

There was no gainsaying the fact. In the brilliancy of its colour and its frame, in its impressiveness of subject, it far outshone the stirring qualities of "Pha-

raoh's Horses" and Mlle. Rosa Bonheur's "Horse Fair," which till now had reigned undisputed in the Zell parlour. It seduced the eye from those other captivating, alluring objects: the gas chandelier, with its countless rhomboid pendants of glass; the ochre plush photograph album on the mahogany centre-table. It bedimmed even the rich magenta magnificence of the velvet-covered easy chairs and the stationary rocker, which happened at the time to be bereft of their customary protective covers.

From this delighted contemplation, Mrs. Zell awoke to a recollection of the chicken stewing on the kitchen stove. The two children, left alone, continued staring at the new art treasure. Winifred's lower jaw had dropped slightly, in painful concentration; her protruding upper teeth jutted out from beneath her nose. The resemblance between Winifred and her mother was remarkable; perhaps it was the common defensive bond of homeliness that seemed to draw them together. Certainly, Agatha Zell was a zealous defender of her daughter's rights. Invariably she found Avery in the wrong when the two children disputed. And she was for ever reassuring Winifred, convincing her in innumerable ways that she was the prettiest, best-dressed and most talented little girl in the neighbourhood.

Avery was the first to cut free from the allurements of the chromo. A moment later he left the parlour, deposited his reefer and hat on the hall-tree and climbed the stairs to his own small room in the attic, where he had been nightly braving the terrors of

strange creakings for nearly twelve months. He proceeded straight to the upper bureau drawer, drew forth the magic "Baseball Curver" that was to revolutionize his athletic prestige, then plunged into the concluding chapter of "How Roy Johnson Won the Game for the Rusie Club."

2

A corrugated bass voice below presently interrupted this absorbing pursuit. Avery looked up from the story; his father had come home, after an absence of two days. Then he heard his mother talking in a strange, high voice. He decided to go downstairs. Dinner *must* be ready by now.

"I tell you I was sick, Aggie," Herman Zell was insisting as Avery came into the dining-room.

His mother's peering grey eyes were fixed aggrievedly on her husband; her voice retained its high, carrying quality,

"If you were sick, why didn't you let me know?" she kept saying.

"Aw, how could I let you know, when I was in the hospital?" Herman importuned.

And so on. Avery wondered why his mother always seemed so provoked on these occasions. If his father was sick and couldn't get home, Avery felt sorry for him. There was nothing very sickly looking about his father, to be sure. Herman Zell was bigger than any of the other boys' fathers. He weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, Avery had heard him say. And he was so handsome. His full round face,

his big black moustache completely captured his son.

Still, Mrs. Zell's discontent persisted throughout dinner, and erupted afresh later on when Herman, after a short nap on the sofa, suggested taking Avery on a sleigh-racing expedition.

"No, he can't go," Agatha quickly disapproved. "It's Sunday."

Herman had lighted one of his black cigars. "What's that got to do with it?"

As usual, Avery's heart was all with his father. He had sometimes seen the Sunday races on Lincoln Boulevard, but he had never ridden in one of the sleighs.

"Oh, please, mamma!" he inserted.

His father spat admirably and accurately into the crockery cuspidor. "It'll be good for the kid," he announced. "The air's just what he needs."

Mrs. Zell's brow contracted. "No, I want him to go with me to his grandfather's this afternoon."

"Tell you what I'll do, then," Herman compromised. "I'll take him ridin' until half-past four, and then I'll bring him to your father's house. There won't be no more sleighin' this winter, you know."

"No, he can't go," Agatha objected.

"Oh, hell!" Herman's temper flared up. "Can't go, ay?" he shouted. "Come on, kid!" he bade Avery. "We'll see who's boss here. You're a damn fool, Aggie!"

Profanity always distilled tears in Agatha. Winifred, too, began to cry. The disproportionate noses of both began to flame like beacons. Avery felt torn and undecided. But his father, his nerves and teeth

set on edge by the lamentations, instantly settled the issue. He seized his son by the wrist, ordered him into his reefer, crammed into his own big ulster, and bore the boy downstairs. As they reached the street, he slammed the outside door and settled his fur cap more securely over his ears.

"Thank God, we're outa that, kid — eh?"

Avery still felt uncomfortable. He wanted to go sleighing with his father. That would be fun for any boy. But he didn't like being involved in quarrels between his father and his mother. His father's loud swearing frightened him. His mother's tears and red nose disquieted him. Almost always, when they disagreed, he, Avery, was drawn into the affair some way. His father would vindicate his position, in nine cases out of ten, by taking the little boy away with him. When Avery came back home, his mother would act as if she thought he ought not to have gone at all. As if he had any choice about it. This very afternoon, when he rejoined his mother at his grandfather's house, he knew she would greet him with a glance of mingled grief and condemnation.

Herman and Agatha quarrelled two or three times a month, usually about the pettiest of details. Mrs. Zell had a way of becoming aggrieved over trifles. Suddenly Herman would roar out his wrath and Agatha would melt into protesting tears. It was as if she enjoyed being subdued by her strong, handsome husband,— as if in her submissiveness she found an odd feminine thrill.

And Herman, it must be confessed, was highly deco-

rative, according to the standards of 1894. But he was no provider. He would work in some cigar factory a few weeks, then spend his earnings flamboyantly and with large gestures, in a day or two. Out of funds again, he would hunt up a new job and begin his cycle all over. Such was his deftness in rolling cigars that he always seemed to find re-employment without trouble. Quite manifestly, such a one is not a great economic asset to any family. Luckily, Agatha's father, the wealthy Thomas Holmes, owned the building in which they lived; and he gave Agatha not only free occupancy of the upstairs flat, but also the rentals from the drugstore. This income, eked out by sporadic allowances from Mrs. Holmes, sufficed to support the family. Herman's contributions had always been small and uncertain. On occasions he would bring Agatha some extravagant gift — a ruby ring, for instance — in a satisfied glow of generosity. He could get no thrill, no stirring picture of himself, from regular contributions to his family's support. He wanted to do everything grandiosely, to have plenty of spending money, to wear dashing clothes, to cut a figure, to be known as a "card." The ultimate ecstasy of pleasure would have been his, if he could once have heard himself called: "That devil of a fellow, Herman Zell." He truly believed he was discharging his economic duties to his wife and children by an occasional staggering present. That Agatha should provide the routine funds seemed a matter of course to him.

"Damn the women! Ain't that right?" Herman now added, with a last recollection of his weeping wife

and daughter upstairs. "Come on! Step lively if you want that sleigh-ride."

But outside the door of Donnelly's Drug Store, Herman paused once more. Inside, behind the soda-water counter, Bert Donnelly waved a convivial hand.

"Need some cigars," muttered Herman, and led his son into the store. "Here, Bert, you old white-liver, give the kid the best chocolate soda in the city"—Herman's mood was rapidly soaring to the amply generous—"and give me some decent cigars—nothin' like those damn rotten sinkers you handed me last week."

"Ain't he the rough one, eh?" Bert Donnelly demanded of the boy.

Avery grinned. He liked Mr. Donnelly, his ice-cream-soda, his gingerale, his chocolate marshmallows. Bert had such a friendly wink. He possessed a sympathetic imagination; he seemed to understand the unrealized aspirations of every man, woman and child in the block. Everybody praised him—even Mrs. Zell. "Good horse sense—that boy," Avery had heard his father say. They were an odd contrast—Bert and Herman Zell. The druggist was small, partly bald and soft-voiced. Herman loomed and boomed above him. Yet Bert Donnelly never seemed afraid of the imposing Herman. Avery, deep in the delight of his ice-cream-soda, watched them chaffing each other over the quality of Bert's cigars.

"Say, Herm, did I tell you about the little lady?" Bert's eye happened on Avery. He winked at Herman Zell and jerked his head toward the rear of the store.

The two men disappeared behind the high prescription desk. Avery could hear Bert Donnelly's voice, occasionally raised to a mincing falsetto — then, suddenly, they both broke out into explosive laughter.

"Did you hear the one about Sadie McGrady?" Herman interrogated. Every moment or two, his voice would diminish to a whisper. Again those hilarious laughs.

Avery had finished his nectar. The rear of the store drew him almost irresistibly. He wanted to hear the funny stories. He had gone behind the prescription desk once or twice and it was a fascinating area back there. In the middle stood the big coal-stove that heated the store, and just behind the stove, the trap door that led down a flight of stairs to a realm of mystery in the basement.

He was aware, though, that he was not wanted — that his appearance behind the prescription case would educe an unpleasant oath or two from his father and an abrupt expulsion. His father would not come forth from those sacredly male precincts until he was quite ready to do so. He might stay there all afternoon. Perhaps there would be no sleigh-ride. Anyway, there was nothing for a little boy to do but wander about the store and hope for the best. To tell the truth, that wasn't half bad fun. There were so many fascinating things to look at: the rows of big bottles, with funny names on them. "Tr. Rhei," "Pot. Bitart," "Caryoph," "Ol. Ricin." What did those letters mean? He would have to ask his friend, Fred Gallagher, who was serving his apprenticeship in the drug-

store as Bert Donnelly's night clerk. He knew well enough about the bottles on one of the other shelves. First came the bottle with rock-candy in it, then horehound, then stick candy — peppermint and lemon, then licorice wood and slippery elm, and finally, the brown molasses kisses. He craved molasses kisses. His eyes bulged out. Maybe his father would buy a nickel's worth for him.

"Have a little akwa poora with it, old man?" he heard Bert Donnelly ask.

"I'll take her straight," quoth Herman.

What could this akwa poora be — and who was this lady Herman was going to take straight? A little fatigued from his Sunday dinner, the ice-cream-soda, and the warmth of the store, Avery glanced languidly about. His eye rested on the showcase of toilet articles. He walked toward it, in the hope that his scuffling steps might attract his father's attention. On top of the showcase stood a large cardboard placard. As Avery's lacklustre eye rested on it, a slight glow of interest enkindled him. The placard, all in red and blue, read:

OLD DR. MEACHAM'S
VIRO PILLS

Cure Nervous Debility, Loss of Appetite, Sleeplessness.
An Unfailing Specific for Liver and Bowels.

On either side of this encouraging pronouncement was the lifelike representation of a man's face. But what a woeful difference between the two. The man at the left seemed shrunk, exhausted, thin, wrinkled.

His moustache drooped miserably. Avery's eyes involuntarily reflected the expression of horror in the man's eyes. It was a pleasure to turn to the gentleman on the right of the placard. His face was ruddy and round; his eyes fairly glittered; his chest was expansive and pigeon-like.

Under the picture of the unfortunate wreck at the left appeared the words: "Before Taking." Under the robust manly man: "After Taking." Avery stared. Why, it couldn't be the same man. The cardboard placard seemed to echo his incredulity; along the bottom ran the words: "Has This Wonderful Remedy Divine Power?" It seemed that Viro Pills reinvigourated even the moustache; that wretched, slinking affair of the "Before Taking" gentleman had become luxuriant and indescribably gladiatorial.

That moustache served to precipitate Avery's confused sense of familiarity. Yes — of course — the "After" man was his father. The resemblance was ineluctable. The picture was beautiful. He would have to tell his mother and Winifred. He wanted to tell his father, too, and be complimented on his sagacity.

If only his father would get through telling funny jokes and talking about that incomprehensible akwa poor! Avery's eyes left the cardboard placard for the gay sunlight and the somewhat dingy snow outside. A trim cutter drove by, all its bells tinkling rhythmically — on its way to the races, surely. The snow was melting, melting. There would be no more sleighing for a year. It must be after three o'clock. Avery's

gaze sought the clock, but en route, by the worst of luck, encountered that jar of molasses kisses.

He sneezed. Yes, it must be confessed, a tear had tickled his nose. One enormous, turgid tear, big enough to make two or three ordinary tears. He felt very badly. So badly he didn't pay any attention when the door was pushed open and a lady came into the drugstore.

"Why, Avery Zell! What's the matter — what you crying about?"

He saw that the lady was Mrs. Griffiths. Even through the mist, he could identify that smouldering eye, those two hispid moles — one on the chin, the other right on the wrinkle that ran from her nose to the left side of her mouth.

"You poor little boy, left all alone. Your mother —"

All in all, he was glad when Bert Donnelly emerged briskly on the other side of the prescription desk. Then his father came out, too. Suddenly, from being a very lonesome person, Avery became the cynosure of a most attentive group. This was gratifying.

"Was afraid we wouldn't go sleigh-racin'," he explained ultimately.

Herman cleared his throat, bent over his offspring solicitously.

"I know what *he* wants," said that clairvoyant Bert Donnelly. He shook out a handful of the molasses kisses, and dropped them into the pockets of the reefer. Then he turned to Mrs. Griffiths.

It was her turn to falter slightly. "I just wanted

another box of them there Viro Pills," she confided in low tones that somehow carried. "For Mr. Griffiths."

3

On the way to the livery stable, Herman's tones lost their solicitous quality. "If your ma ever hears about your tellin' Mrs. Griffith we was goin' sleigh-racin', you'll catch it."

"Papa, what's akwa poor?" His father walked so fast Avery had to trot recurrently to keep pace.

Herman Zell glared down at his son. "Oh! That's just one of Bert's fool jokes. Remember now, don't you tell your ma nothin' 'bout this afternoon. D'ye hear me? She'll blister you if you do — an' I will too."

The livery stable was in an alley a block and a half away. Inside they found Mr. Ege, the proprietor. He came close to them before his near-sighted eyes could focus. "Hello there, Sthell!" he lisped.

"Hello, yourself!" Herman proffered a cigar. "Where's the cutter?"

"Why — I let it go out a half hour ago." Mr. Ege bit off the end of the cigar and filliped it a full six feet with his lips and tongue. "You thaid you'd be here by three o'clock."

"By God!" Herman was beside himself with exasperation. "Ain't ya got nothin' left at all?"

The owner of the stable lighted his cigar and carefully stamped on the match. "I got Beth — but you wouldn't want *her*."

"Sure I want her — an' damn fast."

Mr. Ege was tantalizing in his philosophic suspension of judgment. "Th-the's liable to kick the ever-lathting daylighth outa you." He looked down at Avery indecisively.

"Lithen," he told Herman five minutes later, when father and son were in the old maroon-coloured cutter behind Bess. "What ever y' do, don't hit her with that whip." And he stared after them soberly as the mare bore them swiftly down the alley.

Lincoln Boulevard stretched along the western boundary of the city a distance of two miles. It was paved with macadam and boasted a width of one hundred and fifty feet. A narrow oasis of grass bisected it along its entire length, so that the northbound traffic never intermingled with the southbound. The city recognized its use as a speedway. Today, a score of municipal employees — "white wings" — were on duty; at intervals they dumped shovelfuls of snow over spots the warm sun had melted bare. Herman and his small son drove into the boulevard at Harrison Street, its southernmost boundary, where in fact it came to a sudden stop against a drinking fountain and a row of brick stores. They turned north and joined the slow-moving procession of sleighs of all descriptions that pursued its sleepy way toward the upper end of the boulevard.

The expansive thoroughfare was crowded with pedestrians. Young men attired in fur caps and brown derbies and heavy ulsters strode along the sidewalks in little groups, eying and smiling at the young women

who frequently encountered them. All of the racing took place on the west side of the boulevard. Occasionally, through the rows of onlookers on the grass plot in the centre of the street, Avery could catch glimpses of speeding cutters, intent, excited drivers, turbulent steeds. He was very comfortable and happy. His right cheek distended with one of Bert Donnelly's molasses kisses. The crisp, sun-bathed air seemed impregnated with the cricket chirps of thousands of sleigh-bells, those on the east side regular and faint, those on the west side pulsating shrilly, frenetically. He held the old buffalo robe, completely bald in spots, under his chin tightly; its hairy odour somehow thrilled him.

Bess now walked, now trotted, peacefully along.

"All that mare needs is a man to drive her," confided Herman, without false modesty. "They ain't a horse livin' I can't handle. That's 'cause they know I ain't afraid of 'em. That's the whole trick."

Soon Avery could see the northern end of the boulevard. As the procession ahead of them swung around and started south, the racing cutters would detach themselves from their less mettlesome consorts and go dashing down the course. The slower vehicles remained close to the right curb. Herman began to show traces of excitement. His eyes looked somewhat inflamed. Ahead of them, behind them, similar anticipation became apparent. Men sat up straighter, began chewing their cigars and shifting them about from one corner of their mouths to the other. Their women companions were readjusting veils and coats. The

eyes of the feckless horses betrayed incipient spirit.

It seemed they would never traverse the last hundred yards. Then Herman cut expertly in and around and they were free of all impedimenta at last.

"Now let's see what you got in you, girlie," said Herman.

The wind whipped across their faces, seemed to be scarifying their cheeks. Bess' back hardly moved. Her tremendous effort seemed incredible. It appeared they were propelled by some vast unseen force. Ahead loomed a white horse and sleigh. Presently they drew alongside. There ensued one of those brushes that elicited the cheers of the spectators, that were in fact the real meat of the sport. Since both sleighs were travelling at the same speed, the other cutter had the odd effect of being stationary. Avery could distinctly see the florid man with white hair and sideburns who was driving, and his apprehensive wife or mistress, wearing diamond ear-rings and clutching the side of the seat. Their sleigh looked brand new and very luxurious. The white horse was no cheap adversary, the man with the white sideburns handled the reins with an air of being more than adequate. Still side by side they flew down the course. Herman Zell's imprecations to the mare rose higher and louder.

And luck this time rested with him. She of the diamond ear-rings grew ever more frightened-looking. She was on the boulevard to be seen and adored, not to risk her bones in the sacred cause of sport. She began pulling at her companion's arm; she screamed in his ear. He looked wrathfully down at her, shot a final

contemptuous glance across at Herman and the old maroon cutter, then dropped back. Herman waved his arm jeeringly at his late rival.

A block this side of Harrison Street, Herman began slowing down, that he might have the mare's speed completely under control when they came to the end of the boulevard.

"That's what a man gets for bringin' a woman along," he pointed out. "They're *always* spoilin' something."

Slowly they retraced their way to the upper end of the course. Bess little by little relapsed from her high tension.

"A grand little beast," said Herman.

Once more they skimmed down the thoroughfare, once more painfully made their way northward. Fairly started on their third flight, Herman emitted an oath. Drawing abreast of them on the left materialized the white horse and sleigh, the ruddy-faced man with the white hair and sideburns — but no apprehensive, ear-ringed woman. Somewhere, somehow, he had gotten rid of her. He did not look in Herman's direction — Bess and her lord might have been completely nonexistent — but there was a gleam in his eye that betokened the resolute will, the grim determination.

Bess took up the challenge. Faster and faster, it seemed to Avery, the trees, the knots of spectators, flung themselves toward him. His mouth hung open, but no sound issued from his paralysed throat. He was a little afraid, not so much at his own danger as

his father's swearing. Once Herman looked down at the whip.

It seemed that Bess was destined to prove her breed superior to all white horses; she drew ahead slightly. Then — unutterable tragedy! — the white horse was surely gaining. Now Avery could see only the back of a right ear behind that white sideburn. They were three-quarters down the course.

With a hoarse cry that seemed to become strangled in his nose, Herman snatched the whip from its socket and laid it down upon the mare's flanks. Bess sprang forward so frantically that Avery was thrown against the back of the seat. And now — wonderful! — they were gaining again. He could see the ruddy gentleman's nose — then his left cheek. They were going to win. He could see the stores on Harrison Street. He glanced up at his father. Herman leaned forward rigidly, his lips drawn back from his uneven teeth, his teeth clenching his unlighted cigar. By now Avery could not even see the head of the white horse.

They whisked past the last corner this side of Harrison Street — the accepted finish line — triumphant winners. Herman leaned back once more, the greatest achievement of his career successfully encompassed. Then he leaned forward and pulled on the reins a little. Then he began pulling savagely. Bess was running away.

Avery realized the situation perfectly. There were spectators' shouts that seemed to be snatched from his ear just as they reached it. The few people ahead he

observed scurrying to safety. In that first instant, he was sick with fear. Thereafter, he was excited — interested. As if his real self had jumped out of his skin and were watching the affair from above. To this impersonal onlooker it appeared that Bess' probable objective was the iron drinking fountain.

A few yards this side of the fountain, Herman dropped the right rein and gave one mighty tug on the left. The mare's head twisted back. Avery saw her eye, full of terror — she stumbled and fell heavily on her right shoulder — slid a few feet and lay still.

Avery observed his father shoot out forward in an imposing trajectory. Himself he discovered poised in the air above Bess, seemingly defying the laws of gravity. Then he descended swiftly, still very much interested, upon the mare's ribs.

He reopened his eyes at once. The ground near by, the trees, still seemed flowing toward him. The people too — only the people were actually coming closer. They were running from all directions. The first man picked him up. Then the crowd closed in. Everybody seemed especially fascinated by the spectacle of the gasping mare. They stood inanimate and stared down.

Herman Zell was brought through the circle, and a policeman began pushing people back. Herman was groaning. He held his hand to his head. A fine trickle of blood had just begun to seek a path from his bruised forehead down his right cheek. He was very pale. He kissed Avery, who began to cry.

Bess still lay inert on the melting snow. Her con-

vulsive respiration came shorter. A second policeman knelt beside her. He spoke sharply:

"If you don't want her to die inside of five minutes, get her up on her feet."

Two or three pairs of hands unloosed the breeching straps and withdrew the thills. A half dozen men, undaunted by feminine fears, half pulled, half urged Bess to an upright posture — and suddenly, with a wild scramble, she gained her feet and stood trembling and obviously weak. The men who had assisted joined their women, looking consciously noble — none more so than the policeman who had initiated the proceeding.

"Horses ain't got no nerve," he announced. "They give right up."

He walked the subdued mare back and forth underneath a borrowed blanket. A kind lady proffered a lump of sugar. Bess displayed no interest; then her upper lip began twitching; ultimately, amid cheers, she enveloped the tidbit. Twilight impended. A few people walked away, then more. The maroon cutter was drawn up and reattached; the veterinary policeman vouchsafed Herman a final admonition; and Bess slowly walked from the scene of debacle. Avery's last blurred glimpse of the boulevard disclosed a white horse and sleigh, drawn up at the curb, and a disdainful, pink-skinned driver who observed their departure with significant detachment.

As soon as they had found isolation on a side street, Herman's lower jaw began to re-emerge. He swore indistinctly by way of self-justification.

"Look here!" he said to his son. "If you ever

let out a peep about this to your ma or Lon Ege — or anybody else — I'll cut your heart out — look at me! — I'll cut your heart out and throw it in the stove. Understand? . . . Oh, shut up!" Avery was snuffing again. "An' for Chris' sake, wipe your nose."

At California Place, Herman stopped. "Now let's have a look at you." He surveyed his son carefully; brushed off the right sleeve of his reefer. He drew forth his enormous jack-knife. "See this toad-stabber? Well, remember what's goin' to happen to you if you don't keep your mouth shut."

In front of Number Forty-seven California Place, he checked the disconsolate Bess once again.

"Now skip!" he said, and drove away rapidly.

4

Avery alighted on the stone block that bore the name "HOLMES" in great embossed letters, opened the iron gate with difficulty and walked up the curved walk toward the door. Pausing an instant, he scooped up a handful of wet snow, crunched it between his mittens and "pasted" a thick elm trunk full in the middle.

His grandfather's house symbolized current ideas of grandeur. The street itself reflected impeccable gentility. Great elms bordered the pavement; at intervals the trees on opposite sides united into lofty cathedral arches. The houses were set back amply from the iron-work fence that ran continuously the street's whole length. Other avenues in the city might vaunt newer, even costlier homes, but none could hope to emanate that same air of conservative, aristocratic

prosperity. The sojourners on California Place knew for a surety they were the city's "best people" and being themselves convinced, thereby became in fact the city's "best people."

Thomas Holmes, with one or two other pioneer friends, had moved in 1879 from what was now the city's business section to the bridle-path and pasture land that now constituted the Place. These far-sighted souls not only builded the large frame houses where they now held court, but also bought all the land on the street for three blocks. Thus they controlled, and insisted upon, the quality of would-be residents.

By now, twilight had completely confirmed its fleeting hold. Avery could see the gaslight reflected dully through the orange-coloured transom-glass above the front door; and filtering dazzlingly through the interstices of the blinds in the living-room to the right, came the achromatic rays from that newest of all marvels, the Welsbach gas mantle.

The light blanched the faces of the people within when they greeted him. His mother's face was like marble as she kissed him and verified the cleanness of his hands. Winifred's dark eyes looked coal black. His grandfather's hair and skin were white anyway; the light transformed him least of all. He was seventy years old and had by now retired from the lumber business that had made him rich. From beneath the steel rimmed spectacles jutted out the precursor of Agatha's and Winifred's most conspicuous feature, the "Holmes nose." It projected forth just as shamelessly from the daguerreotyped visage of Thomas

Holmes' grandfather, in the marriage certificate on the third page of the family bible. In the men of the Holmes family, that nose blended into a general expression of forcefulness; on the faces of Agatha and Winifred, it was a calamity.

Perhaps his grandfather's age was conspiring to extinguish patriarchal affection for Avery. More likely, Thomas Holmes was of an austere, undemonstrative strain. Most probable, though, he identified Avery, not as his grandson, but as the get of Herman Zell, whom he detested, whose runaway marriage with his infatuated old-maid daughter he would never forgive. Whatever the reason, he never unbent far to Avery. Upon Winifred he sometimes smiled. Perhaps once more it was the bond of that nose.

But Avery, always a little afraid of his grandfather, really warmed toward his grandmother. Her habit of fussing over him was embarrassing, naturally; but he always sensed an undercurrent of real tenderness. Jane Holmes had come from New York State with her husband immediately after their marriage. There was that in her that spoke of courage, of dignity, of gentleness — and fleetingly, of unrealized dreams. Something in the expression of her wide, close-compressed mouth, her deep-set brown eyes with their echo of underlying shadows, suggested a rich idealism reluctantly made self-defensive by the exigencies of environment. Life with a strong, domineering, narrow man like Thomas Holmes had made her resourceful in expedients, in compromises, without quite embittering her underlying fineness.

She offered tea to Avery, who accepted the insipid beverage for the sake of the lady-finger that went with it.

"Did papa bring you?" his grandmother asked. "And did you have lots of fun?"

Avery recollected the toad-stabber; his eyes opened slightly as he nodded between gulps.

"The idea of taking a boy his age sleigh-racing on Sunday!" Thomas Holmes interjected querulously. "It's just sinful."

Avery ate on greedily. He was hungry. His grandfather looked at him inimically, as if counting the cost of each sandwich and lady-finger.

He finally broke out pettishly: "Aggie! Don't you know that boy'll get the rickets sure if he keeps on drinking tea?"

Avery had long since discounted this dread prospect; whenever he did anything his grandfather objected to, "the rickets" was dragged forth from its lair and brandished before his eyes.

He could usually rely on his grandmother to change an uncomfortable subject; instinctively his eyes sought hers.

"I don't know, I'm sure, what can be keeping Rebecca," she said brightly, "I do hope she'll come before you go, because she's only here till Tuesday." She smiled in Avery's direction. "And she has the sweetest little girl."

His look was not responsive. Sweet little girls were an awful nuisance; he resented the sentimental implication. Hunger numbed, his eye roved about the large

room, with its high lights and black shadows. His glance paused on a distant corner.

"Gramma! Say, gramma, can I play the music box?"

Instant dissension arose. Thomas Holmes, beginning a horrified refusal, choked and had to leave the room in a volley of high-pitched coughs. Avery's mother shook her head.

"It's Sunday." She turned to Mrs. Holmes for confirmation.

Jane Holmes looked quizzically judicial. "Isn't there one sacred selection?"

Avery launched a flank attack. "You let Winifred play the piano on Sunday."

"Well — if you can make it play the sacred selection," decided the hard-pressed Agatha.

He raised the cover of the inlaid music box, and scrutinized the large cardboard, bearing the box's repertoire. This program was in itself indescribably fascinating. On each side rose a marble column, encompassed by a spiral scroll bearing such immortal names as Bellini, Meyerbeer, Gung'l and Schuloff. At the top were many harps and roses, and the mystifying title: "Fabrique de Genève." At the bottom: "Etouffoirs en Acier Soit a Spiraux."

The indicator pointed to Number Two, "Little Fisher Maiden." The sacred selection, Handel's "Largo" was number one. Desire prompted a quick decision; he wound up the box and pulled forward the starting lever. The shiny steel cylinder, bristling with hundreds of needle points, began turning slowly; the

first tinkling staccato notes permeated the inner cover of glass.

"Avery! That's not a sacred piece."

"I know, mamma, but I hafta play this piece to get to the other one." His demeanour radiated unassailable logic. "You know that, mamma."

"They're all classical numbers," put in that dean of tacticians, his grandmother.

Remorselessly the music box tinkled on and on, with a slight readjusting crash between each number — through the duet from "Faust" and "La Grande Duchesse, Air: Dites lui." Then a simpler, livelier measure commenced.

"There's nothing very sacred, or classical either, about 'Old Dog Tray,'" Mrs. Zell pronounced in injured tones.

The next number on the program of the music box had always held the strongest grip on Avery's emotions. It was entitled: "Just Before the Battle, Mother." He knew the words of the song, its pathetic message. He could distinctly see the blue-clad soldier boy, writing a letter to his mother the night before the big battle of the campaign. The details of the picture came clear: the camp-fires, the stern sentries, the figures of other soldiers coming and going in the half-light, the bearded general biting the unsmoked cigar, the fitful gleam of the rebel camp-fires across the river.

His lips moved with the first lines of the chorus:

Mother, mother, you may never
Press me to your heart again.

An ineffable sadness parched his heart. His mother — even Winifred — seemed very quiet. His grandmother had lost her favourite brother in the Battle of the Wilderness; her gaze was lustrous.

"Was the soldier killed, mamma?"

Tragedy ruled Agatha's brow. "Yes," she said.

It seemed as if his heart would break. Not even the startling effect of the Largo played on a music box could rouse him.

The doorbell jingled discordantly. His mother hastened to shut off the sacrilegious music box. Presently entered the chamber of sorrow a buxom, decisive woman and a bleached-looking little girl.

"You remember my niece, Mrs. McPhee?" introduced his grandmother.

At once the sitting-room seemed divided into two camps: Agatha and her brood on one side; the newcomer and the bleached little girl on the other; Mrs. Holmes the perfect interlocutor. The ladies bowed and gave forth little fawning noises. Mrs. McPhee lived in the small town of Bryant, ninety miles northwest of the city, but her bold assurance quickly gave Agatha to understand that she would tolerate no superciliousness on that score. Her grey grenadine gown was quite as fashionable as Agatha's black poplin — her sleeves even more balloon-like.

She had come down the day before to consult an eye specialist about Ruby's eyes.

"Expense is no object in such things," she expounded, with quite an air.

They all settled down into false attitudes of com-

fort: Mrs. Holmes at the tea table; the two younger women appraising one another under sleek glances of endearment; the children staring implacably at each other.

"Really, Mrs. Zell, my little girl is *such* a book-worm I have to fairly drive her outdoors to play with the other children."

Agatha absorbed this opening foray with a considerate smile.

"She *don't* look very well."

"Oh, she's not at all sickly," hastened Mrs. McPhee. "Her mind's just a few years ahead of her body. My neighbours insist she's brilliant — though I don't believe in telling *her* anything like that, myself." The visitor's large incisors gleamed moistly in conscious deprecation.

"Now isn't that funny? That's just what my neighbours say about Winifred — and yet she's so strong and well."

Mrs. McPhee resolved to hazard a practical demonstration.

"Ruby! I wonder if you couldn't recite that little piece your teacher said was so lovely."

Ruby oscillated pessimistic indecision.

"*Please*, darling — don't make mamma coax." She turned to Agatha. "You wouldn't mind would you?"

"Oh, no. Something in keeping with the Sabbath —"

The traveller nodded. "It's beautiful enough for *that!*"

Ruby caracoled to a favourable location, spread out the hem of her muslin dress and curtseyed abruptly. Mrs. McPhee, her heart in her eyes, nodded corroboratingly. The little girl declaimed in a childish voice that seemed to have its origin, not in her throat, but in the roof of her mouth:

Oh, lovely little rose-bush,
I prithee tell me true,
To be as sweet as a sweet, red rose,
What must a body do?

To be as sweet as a sweet, red rose
A little girl like you
Just grows and grows and grows and grows,
And that's what she must do.

Mrs. McPhee's lips had been moving silently, in sympathetic unison with her talented daughter's. She now initiated vigorous applause, in which the others, except Avery, joined somewhat less enthusiastically. Ruby rose and curtseyed once more.

Her mother looked around with an entirely vindicated smile.

"A very nice little poem," Agatha said. "Winfred!"

Avery's sister had been absorbing her cousin's effort with a demeanour that was not whole-heartedly uncritical. Her teeth protruded from her opened mouth with an effect of anxious expectancy.

"Yes, mamma."

"I know Mrs. McPhee and little Ruby would love to hear you play one of your pieces."

Winifred was promptness itself in acceding to the suggestion. With all the assurance of the true *artiste*, she simpered slightly, lowered the piano stool, performed that baffling feminine propriety of smoothing the back of her skirt under her, and at last mounted. Avery beheld these preliminaries with vast boredom. He was glad he was not a talented little girl.

"Which one'll I play, mamma?"

"Now let me see." Agatha's brow contracted with the mental effort of choosing from among her daughter's abounding repertory.

"It's such a lovely day, why not play 'Bubbling Spring'? Do you think you could remember that one, sweetheart?"

She couldn't fool Avery. He knew Winifred could play only two pieces — and the other one, "Thunder Clouds," she always muffed. His prodigious ennui persisted while Spring bubbled and almost burst. This was all so silly in comparison with the things he liked. Sleigh-racing, for instance. At once he was flying down Lincoln Boulevard again, with Old Sideburns not three feet away. Supposing his mother knew about the runaway! He would be the hero, instead of these useless little girls. He could tell them something, if he wanted to, that would make them sit up and —

All at once he noticed that every one in the room was staring in his direction.

"Too bad the little boy isn't talented," he heard Mrs. McPhee say sweetly.

"Oh, but he is!" his mother insisted. "He has a very pretty voice. The choirmaster up at St. Anne's

is just crazy to have him sing in their boy choir."

The lady from Bryant must have possessed an uncanny instinct for her adversary's weak spots. "We'd love to hear him," she urged. "Does he know 'Angels Ever Bright and Fair'?"

Avery ignored the hunted appeal in his mother's eyes.

"Got an awful sore throat," he announced. His diminutive Adam's apple quavered in a series of agonized swallowings and coughings.

Right there his mother made a serious tactical blunder. Instead of corroborating his story, she chose to disbelieve him.

"Mamma is ashamed of you," she announced. If it had been Winifred, she would have offered a thousand excuses.

For the moment, all the room's minor antagonisms vanished in the universal abhorrence of the one small and defenceless male. Even his grandmother failed him temporarily. That bleached little Ruby voiced the universal disapproval by querying quite distinctly:

"He's a bad little boy, isn't he, mamma?"

The cut-steel beads on the front of Mrs. McPhee's dress glinted in the white gas-light.

"Sh!" she said, the gleam of ultimate victory in her rolling eye.

5

The grippe had overtaken him at the most exasperating time imaginable. If he could have known definitely that he had not won a bicycle, he would have

been disappointed, naturally; but to be immured in his stuffy little bedroom for ten long days without knowing one way or the other — that was really a difficult situation for a boy twelve years old to endure with equanimity.

The great chewing-gum guessing contest had reached its climax a fortnight before, on July first. For months prior, Avery had been caught by the glamour of the affair. Each five-cent package of Glaumer's Pepsin Gum contained a small tissue paper ballot bearing the printed words:

Glaumer's Pepsin Gum Co.,
Chicago, Ill.

My guess is that the total number of bushels of wheat bought and sold on the Chicago Board of Trade on July 1, 1896, will be.....

Name

Address

On the reverse side, very difficult to read on account of the thinness of the paper, were set forth the terms of the Prize Contest. To those twelve persons who most accurately guessed the correct number of bushels, Glaumer's would send brand-new, 1896 model, Columbia bicycles with complete equipment, including adjustable, ram's-horn handlebars. "These handsome bicycles will be expressed to the lucky winners as soon after July 1st as the judges can make their decision. No guess will be considered if the envelope bears a later date than June 28, 1896."

By dint of petitioning all his relatives, male and

female, to save gum-wrappers, and pledging his own resources, he had amassed thirty-three of the coveted bits of paper. Careful examination of the morning paper's market page indicated that the daily turnover at Chicago approximated 145,000 bushels of wheat. He deployed his forces as shrewdly as possible, fixing his estimates at intervals of two thousand bushels.

He could hardly sleep the night of July 1st; at dawn the next morning he had crept downstairs for the newspaper. The actual number of bushels was 125,000. His hand trembled a little as he consulted his leather notebook. His nearest guess was 124,000, just a thousand odd bushels out of the way. Momentarily his heart sank; he shivered in his flannellette nightgown. Then strong hope began oozing up within him.

By July third, he felt certain he had captured one of those entrancing Columbias, handlebars and wheel-spokes gleaming in their new nickel-plate, the framework enamelled in the robin's-egg blue that distinguished this famous make of bicycle. Already he had begun to watch for the express wagon. His anticipation almost blotted out all thought of the impending Fourth. Then descended on his hopeful head a malignant cold — then a fever. His mother banished him to his white iron bed.

"It's La Grippe," she said with authority.

Ordinarily, he might have extracted some small solace from being afflicted with the country's newest and most fashionable malady. If it could only have befallen him during the school year! But no — of course

not! His mother gave away to Harold Zimmerman the shoe-box full of firecrackers he had so laboriously unbraided from ten packs, the half dozen precious cannon crackers, his assortment of roman candles, pin-wheels, sticks of punk, and other portions of his very soul and body. He could hear "Zimmie" dashing down the stairs with his unexpected booty. The next morning at day-break he listened to his fellows congregating on the street below — then, the first sharp crepitation, ushering in the Glorious Fourth.

Glorious!

It was sufficiently goading to have had to lie in bed, and swallow quinine capsules and Mrs. Bedlam's Herbine, and hear the other kids having a circus — though it did help a little when that Zimmerman sissie got himself burned with a "squib" and went home bawling. But what had really tortured him was uncertainty. Would his new Columbia come the next morning, or wouldn't it?

And now for ten long days he had been asking that fateful question. His bed was so placed that he could look down Beech Street. Every day, approximately at eleven o'clock and at four, an express wagon was almost sure to appear in the distance, gradually approach and finally disappear up the street. His whole day narrowed down to those two deliveries, though his flickering hope bade him keep vigil against special deliveries. He was much better; in another day or two, he would be out again.

Today, then, was the psychological time for the Columbia's arrival. The judges must have decided the

contest in ten days; four days more would suffice for the journey from Chicago.

His eyes left the street for a moment, rested negligently upon the room's familiar adornments. From his right, the copy of the Gibson Girl, executed by Winifred and bearing her initials, looked aristocratically down upon him. The half-tones of West Point life and the Christy depiction of a West Point ball were in line with the foot of the bed. Further to the right was the door of his closet — supposedly a clothes closet, but now his official darkroom for the development of photographic plates. His clothes, dispossessed of their rightful abode, lay limply about the room. Over the foot of the bed hung his navy-blue jersey sweater with broad, white-striped "turtle-neck" collar — just where he had wrathfully thrown it when his mother first sentenced him to bed.

The sweater impeded his view of the street slightly. He extended his bare foot beyond the sheet and kicked it to the floor. It must be almost four o'clock. He felt warm and sticky. It was pleasant to visualize himself riding along Lincoln Boulevard on the new Columbia Racer.

His casual glance rested on the bedspread thrown in a heap to one side of the mattress. On its virgin whiteness appeared here and there hieroglyphic splotches of dirt, which he promptly identified as the footprints of his two-year old mongrel, Reggie. Mrs. Zell's strictest injunction forbade Reggie's presence on the bed; yet only fifteen minutes ago, Avery had permitted — nay, had openly solicited — the small, black

near-spaniel to leap joyously on this self-same bed-spread. He now rearranged the spread so that the paw-marks were not visible. He was sorry, but Reggie was his only genuine comfort in these difficult days.

No — not quite the only solace. He could read — at night, when express companies had ceased their labours. On the adjacent white chair was his blue-covered "Tom Sawyer," which he had acquired with a suit of clothes twelve months ago. He had finished re-reading it, night before last. Also on the chair was a stack of "Harper's Weeklies" — the issues containing the instalments to date of "The Grey Man" — borrowed from the obliging Bert Donnelly. He had completed the first few chapters last night. The story enthralled him. He could hardly wait to finish it.

A rag-man's wagon bumped over the cobblestones below; the ventral blare of the rag-man's horn ascended to Avery's ears. Distantly he caught the song of an apple vendor:

Oh, won't you buy my appoes,
The finest ever seen!

From the floor below came the sound of Winifred's piano practise. Monotonously she played the scale of F; even after a year's effort, she could never overcome a slight indecision as to whether, in descending the scale, B-flat should be struck with the third or fourth finger of the right hand.

His mother came up the stairway and entered his room with a cup of beef broth, which he detested.

"Oh, darn it, ma!"

"Now don't be a naughty boy, Avery. It's good for you."

"I wish you wouldn't say 'naughty' to me. Sounds as if I was two years old." He drank the broth with a scowl.

"I wish I didn't have to use the word at all," Mrs. Zell retorted in an aggrieved voice. "I work hard in a hot kitchen to make broth for you, and then you're angry."

She departed, so hurt that she failed to observe the fixity of his look through the windows. A little more than a block off, he had espied the express wagon. As it drew nearer, his sharp perception descried a wooden crate on top of the load — yes, and in it a bicycle!

A first segment of shadow threatened an eclipse of his bounding elation. The framework of the bicycle was enamelled black — not robin's-egg blue. But now he remembered having seen Columbia bicycles with black enamelling.

His heart was throbbing in his chest as if it had determined to batter its way out. All his anxieties and uncertainties disappeared deliciously. His cup was running over. His face, his ears, felt warm with blood.

In front of the Gallagher house, the expressman checked his grey horse to a walk. He seemed to be scrutinizing the street numbers. Slowly the wagon drew opposite the Zell flat. Avery had disobediently gotten out of bed; he now stared out of the screened window in a climax of suspense.

The express wagon slowly proceeded past the drug store.

Avery was hardly aware that the segment of shadow upon his abounding joyousness had rapidly augmented. Principally he was conscious of wrath at the expressman's stupidity in not seeing the numbers, "489," painted in flaring white symbols on the transom window below. He started to call out to the driver, but desisted lest his mother come running upstairs again.

"The big stiff!" he muttered. Noiselessly he raised the screen and peered out after the insensible expressman. By this time, a modicum of doubt had injected itself into his anger. Suppose, after all, the bicycle wasn't for him.

Three-quarters of the way down the next block, the wagon stopped. The driver dismounted with disconcerting assuredness, swung down the bicycle crate and disappeared between two houses.

"He's just plumb crazy!" the boy in the flannellette nightgown inspirited himself. Yet the expressman might not be to blame. Perhaps Glaumer's had gotten the address wrong.

The expressman reappeared, crateless.

Avery withdraw his head into the bedroom with that feeling of dazed inertness, of suspended animation, that always accompanies the sudden subsidence of exuberant hope. There was still the chance of some mistake, but he scoffed bitterly at the possibility. His disillusion was complete, his heart sick with disappointment.

By now the eclipse was well-nigh complete.

Some last spark of faith bade him look out of the window once more. No — the expressman had disappeared, with an air of irrefragable finality.

Harold Zimmerman and the brothers Gallagher backed around the corner of the drug store below, gazing down with horrified fascination at some object that was not yet visible. Two men who had been repairing telephone wires came hurrying across the street, the climbing-irons on their feet clanking with each step. A woman stopped and stared as if petrified.

Out of the hot sunshine of Jay Street slowly crawled Reggie, propelling himself awkwardly along with his front feet. His hind quarters dragged paralytically. Something had happened to his back. Behind him came an assemblage of five or six men. Avery recognized Bert Donnelly, and his sallow night clerk, Fred Gallagher, in shirt-sleeves.

Reggie's tongue hung out and he panted painfully. At the doorway to the Zell flat, he stopped. His tail wagged feebly.

"How'd he get hurt?" Avery heard Fred Gallagher ask.

"A beer wagon run over him, 'way over on Ninth Street," Harold Zimmerman volunteered with excited pride. "I seen the whole thing."

"His back's broke," diagnosed Bert Donnelly. "Think of coming two whole blocks like that!"

"The minute he got hurt he started for home." Zimmie was bound to tell all he knew.

One or two other people joined the semicircle about

the prostrate little dog, and out of the doorway appeared Mrs. Zell.

"Oh, Mrs. Zell, Avery's dog's hurt," clamoured Zimmie.

Agatha took one look at Reggie, then leaned against the brick wall.

"Look out!" shouted Bert Donnelly. "Carry her into the store!"

They bore Avery's fainting mother through the side door into the drug store; but Avery's eyes hardly left the huddled form of the dog.

Fred Gallagher stooped to pat Reggie's head.

"Watch out!" warned one of the linemen. "He might bite you."

"Guess not." The night clerk gently stroked the black hair. "Poor old pup! 'Fraid you're a goose-goner."

A policeman, observing the little knot of people from afar, ran up and took decisive cognizance of the affair. When Avery saw the officer draw out a gleaming revolver, he all but cried out in mortal agony. Reggie surveyed the newcomer with a courteous, confident eye, as one in sore and perplexing trouble greets hopefully the semblance of assistance. His tail kept wagging — that was the excruciating part of it! Avery's tears blurred his vision.

He heard two shots fired. When he could see again, the policeman was carrying away Reggie's body by the tail — the tail that had wagged so friendlily thirty seconds before.

The eclipse of all happiness was now complete.

6

At nine o'clock, his mother kissed him good-night, a little more tenderly than usual, with instructions to turn out his green-shaded gas lamp and go to sleep not later than ten o'clock. He heard his father come home a few minutes later, listened to his mother's customary protesting accents and his father's gruff response, waited until Herman Zell's final angry outburst had silenced his wife.

Then the convalescent drew the damaged bedspread up around his knees and prepared to extract what little happiness lingered in life. The sight of Reggie's footprints almost resurrected his tears. He recalled Fred Gallagher's phrase.

"Yes, he's a goose-goner now all right."

On the other hand, there lay "The Grey Man," waiting to be read. And a small pitcher of his mother's exceptional lemonade. The certainty, too, that he could read as long as he wanted without further annoyance from his family.

By the time he had reached the end of Chapter XIV, he realized that it was after ten o'clock, perhaps almost eleven. As a matter of passing interest, he pulled his silver watch from beneath the pillow.

It was five minutes after twelve.

Yet he *must* read enough of the next instalment to find out how the fight came out. But now impended another tragedy. The next issue of the magazine was missing. Of course it had to be that instalment!

His decision was rapid, if astounding. The missing

issue was almost certain to be in the cellar of the drug store, where Bert Donnelly kept all of his old magazines. That particular number had doubtless become separated from the others; but Avery had a sure instinct it had not been destroyed. Bert Donnelly never threw away or burned up an old magazine. "I'd be dead certain to want to read something in it," he justified himself, "the very next day after I'd thrown it away. Always happens that way." The little cellar of the drug store was half full of periodicals, recent and ancient.

A moment more, and Avery arose cautiously from his bed, slipped on a pair of stockings and soft moccasins, stuffed the tails of his nightgown into his knee trousers, drew on his coat, and started softly on his way downstairs. He remembered that the third step from the bottom was the creaky one, and skipped it. He could hear his father snoring, even through the closed bedroom door. Down the second flight of stairs he stole, and out upon the square of stone sidewalk that still bore sanguine reminder of the deceased Reggie.

A feeble night-light burned in the drug store, behind the prescription case. Avery paused, irresolute. The extinguishment of all the other lights indicated that Fred Gallagher, the night clerk, had locked the doors, and retired to his leather couch near the stove, until morning. Avery knew that Fred usually closed the store at midnight; but he had hoped the night clerk would not be asleep when he arrived. He could descry no signs of life within. The only apparent method of gaining ingress now was to push the button

of the night-bell. This he could not gain courage to do. Fred Gallagher had always been obliging and friendly enough; but his Celtic temper, once aroused by any imposition, was a fearful and appalling affair. He might comprehend the urgent necessity of securing the missing installment of "The Grey Man" that night; and again he might not.

In this quandary, a feasible alternative presented itself to Avery. He confirmed his hope that the side window of the drug store had been left open. He pushed up the screen and inserted his body through the aperture. His moccasins muted his hesitant footsteps to absolute silence.

He felt his way around the high prescription counter. Fred Gallagher lay asleep on the couch, his thin face and long hair resting on his left arm. Avery regarded him intently. He perceived now that he might have rung the night-bell. He was sure Fred would have understood. There was something gentle in the curve of the clerk's thin-lipped mouth, in the lines of his almost ascetic face. He looked meeker than ever now, his spectacles off. It was rumoured around the neighbourhood with horror that his real ambition had been to enter the priesthood; that his apprenticeship in pharmacy was a sop to the family's poverty.

Avery observed with elation that the trap-door leading to the cellar lay open. Raising it without waking Fred would have proved difficult. He helped himself to a candle and match, and descended.

At the bottom of the ladder, he raised his right knee and drew the match-head swiftly along the leg of his

trousers. The lighted candle threw dancing shadows about the walls of the small, triangular basement. Enormous bottles here and there gave back ghostly confirmation of the flickering illumination. A cob-web grazed his eye-lashes. Damp mouldiness rose like a mist from the unpaved earth beneath his feet. But there, to the left of the empty coal bin, lay his ultimate quest, the disorderly piles of old magazines. Somewhere in that chaos reposed *Harper's Weekly* for February 22, 1896 — and that precious instalment of "The Grey Man."

At once his whole consciousness converged sharply upon the scattered heaps. A middle stack seemed most promising. Intently he commenced fingering up the edges of the magazines, his devouring eyes focussed on the title-pages. Several copies of *Harper's Weekly* appeared, all for the preceding year. Deeper and deeper into the mass he groped.

"Who's there?"

The sharp demand wrested him abruptly from his absorbed search — left his consciousness dangling anchorless for a moment. Again descended the menacing interrogation, then:

"Throw up your hands and come up that ladder quick, if you don't want a bullet through your belly!"

Avery's dry throat at last sanctioned a feeble piping noise.

"It's me, Fred."

There was a moment's silence.

"Who's me?" Fred Gallagher's voice had a little surrendered its sternness.

"Avery — Avery Zell."

"Well, come upstairs, anyway."

Avery's fears did not much decrease when he gained the floor above and first caught sight of Fred Gallagher. The young drug-clerk was standing behind the stove. His collar was off, his hair unkempt, his face as pale as the boy's. In his shaking hand he carried a revolver. He stared at the intruder wildly an instant, and Avery stared back, his face working with near-at-hand tears.

All at once the strain was over. Fred Gallagher tipped his head back and laughed shrilly.

"What in mischief were you after doing down there, kid?"

When he heard Avery's explanation, he laughed even louder.

"Well, that's a good one!" he ejaculated. "Guess that story must be kind-a worth reading. Come on down again — it must be somewhere in that pile."

In the musty vault they set to work together. At sight of the last magazine in the pile, Avery's heart bounded exultantly. After all this danger and uncertainty, he had secured the missing instalment.

"Next time, ring the bell, kid," Fred Gallagher said as he unlocked the front door. "That cellar came a whole lot closer t' having a goose-goner in it tonight than it ever will again, I'm hoping." He looked at Avery solemnly, his tired eyes blinking. "Well, good night, kid. Have all the fun you can."

A mellow, waning moon had risen over the roofline

of the Griffiths' house. Avery heard the drugstore door slam shut and the key turn in the lock as he glided swiftly around the corner toward the entrance to the Zell apartment. Under his arm he clutched the coveted magazine.

As he curved in toward his own door, a man emerged from the obscurity of the entrance-way, emitted an inarticulate sound, half cough, half exclamation, and circled around Avery with extreme celerity. The man was tall and very thin, wore a checked suit and a flat straw hat. He bent his head low as he passed the boy, and held his hand up to his hat, so that his face was not visible.

Avery reached his door-step, thoroughly scared for the second time. The silent unexpectedness of the encounter filled him with weird terror. He looked around. The tall man had vanished round the corner.

Somehow he had no enthusiasm left for "The Grey Man." He had locked both the outer door and the door of his room; he felt quite safe. The story was interesting, too; he skimmed rapidly through the instalment to find out what happened to Launcelot. But the sudden shock of dread had spoiled his whole adventure; fiction seemed insipid after fact.

He lay awake for a time. Gradually fatigue asserted itself; his mind divagated; he began sliding off into a warm sea of drowsiness. When the muffled report of a revolver reached his ears, he only murmured: "'Nother goose-goner," and fell asleep.

7

In spite of his acknowledged importance in the world, he really could not resist the lure of the booklet he had picked up on the doorstep.

"Doctor Boomer, the Old Reliable Specialist in Men's Diseases." Under this caption on page one was the profile of a benign old man with flowing beard. Below the picture: "He Cures the Stubbornest Cases."

Into this interesting literary material, Avery had progressed as far as page four, where he encountered the following disturbing information:

Perhaps you are the victim of some chronic blood disease and don't realize the fact. Nature has a way of sometimes covering over the results of such excesses for years, only to inflict her severest penalties upon the helpless victim in the end. Sleeplessness, pain, nervous debility: these are all indications of the hidden worm gnawing at your vitals.

"Take no chances," advises Doctor Boomer. "You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by a visit to my office. I will give you a thorough, painless examination, absolutely free of charge. If you are a sound, healthy man, I will tell you so. If you are afflicted with one or more diseases, I will guarantee a cure by the use of my scientific modern methods."

The most hopeless cases yield readily to Dr. Boomer's expert treatment. He has cured thousands. He can cure you.

Avery read on hurriedly. Each page dealt with some different disease. The names were long and difficult of pronunciation; he had never heard of any of them. The last few pages were filled with testimon-

ials. "A well known gentleman of this city, whose name is withheld at his request, writes as follows," etc. There were grateful bits of appreciation from "a famous lawyer," "a celebrated politician," "one of the most popular members of the fire department," and many others.

Avery had not the faintest notion of what all this meant. He readily recognized, however, the implication of secrecy in the phrase, "men's diseases." The pamphlet had to do with that vast world of forbidden knowledge; instinctively he knew his mother would "have a fit" if she caught him reading Dr. Boomer's pamphlet; therefore every word was precious to his inquisitive soul. The booklet, nevertheless, made him uneasy. He was conscious of a slight nausea. More than likely he himself was suffering from some mysterious disease. He was certain something ailed him; there was no doubt about his sleeplessness — at any rate since the murder of Fred Gallagher, three nights before.

The recollection of the crime that had stirred the whole city recalled him to his sense of vast importance. He folded Dr. Boomer's valuable "Message to Men," and crammed it into his inside coat pocket for further digestion; at the same time his eyes once more sought out the fragment of lavender crape that hung droopily from the front door of the Gallagher cottage.

That symbol of grief held a curiously mixed significance for him. It suggested the barbaric rites,

which, according to his mother, the death of any Catholic precipitated. Most of the night before he had lain awake, in bitter disappointment over not being able to hear the hilarious noises of the predicted "wake." Instead, the dun-coloured little cottage had borne only the vestigia of desolation. Fred's father, Michael Gallagher, had been seen to emerge once or twice, looking oddly unfamiliar without his policeman's uniform. The three Gallagher boys appeared once or twice in their front yard, but they had merely exchanged looks with Avery; speech was mutually understood to be bad form on such occasions.

He had seen Mrs. Gallagher, too, for just an instant, when his mother took him with her, on what was designated a neighbourly call of sympathy. Avery had shown some surprise when his mother announced her intention.

"It's my duty to go," she retorted, "even if they do believe in images and masses."

It seemed all the women on the block entertained similar ideas of duty. Avery had watched the front door of the cottage close after them, one by one. He wondered what they did, once they were inside. Presently they would reappear, handkerchiefs to eyes. Mrs. Zell had maintained her watchful waiting behind the front lace curtains until Mrs. Griffiths and her daughter, Florence, had paid their respects to the memory of the dead drug-clerk; then she fared forth.

A stoutish relative of Mrs. Gallagher's had opened the door for them. Her eyes were red. Not a word passed until they were in the obscure hallway.

"You wish to see the body?" inquired the red-eyed woman, with ceremony.

Agatha Zell evinced genteel complaisance.

It was as they entered the tiny parlour that he had his fleeting glimpse of Mrs. Gallagher. She had suddenly arisen from a dark corner with a sobbing noise, and abruptly left the room.

Mrs. Zell's peering eyes indicated slight resentment.

"Perhaps —" she began.

"Oh, no," their obese conductor forestalled.

Avery stared round-eyed at the candles that surrounded the coffin. His mother extracted a handkerchief from her starched shirtwaist and began to wipe her eyes.

The mistress of ceremonies said:

"So this is the little boy who saw Fred just before — just before —" Her voice died away.

Then they lifted him up so he could look into the coffin. He had never seen a dead body before. His principal sensation was astonishment at the appearance of his friend.

"Lovely," breathed his mother.

"Yes," agreed the stout woman, "he's laid out nice."

Avery marvelled at the waxen, cataleptic rigidity of the figure. He was somewhat disappointed in not being able to perceive the bullet hole behind Fred's left ear.

But the spectacle of the body of his friend was not comparable, for sheer excitement, with his daily journey to police headquarters. When he had awakened,

the morning after his nocturnal adventure, had seen the crowd standing about the drugstore, and had heard from his excited mother that Fred Gallagher's body had been found in the drug store cellar by Bert Donnelly early that morning, he had instinctively decided to say nothing about the affair. An hour or two later, he first remembered encountering the sinister tall man with the straw hat. All at once he felt sure by some clear intuition that this prowler had murdered the young night-clerk. He distinctly recalled hearing the revolver shot just before dropping off to sleep.

He seemed entirely recovered from his illness. Agatha Zell was in a condition of such nervous exhaustion that she had forgotten entirely about such inconsequential things as influenza. Unimpeded, he dressed and joined the crowd below. In his heart of hearts he was saying: "I know all about this affair. Nobody else knows, and nobody knows I know." His knowledge gave him an expansive sense of superiority. "What would those cops say if I went up and told them about last night?" Their visualized astonishment sent a thrill through him.

His father gave the family all the latest news when he finally came up for breakfast.

"Fred shot himself — that's a sure thing," he told Agatha. "They found Bert Donnelly's revolver at his side with one cartridge empty."

Avery's mouth opened wide. He fought with himself to remain silent.

"But how could he shoot himself behind his left ear?" besought Agatha.

"Easy — like this." Herman crooked his left arm back, and discharged an imagined weapon into the rear of his head. He was in his element that morning. His friendship with Bert Donnelly had gained him access to the scene of the tragedy. Already he had done a full day's work, arguing with the policemen and detectives.

"What I can't understand," pursued Mrs. Zell, "is why he should go to all that extra trouble to shoot himself there."

Herman put down his knife and fork with patient condescension.

"Why, can't you see, that's the most vulnerable spot — an' besides, he done it there to make people think somebody else fired the bullet."

Agatha shook her head. "There's the missing money, too."

Avery's father lost his temper. "Oh, you're crazy, Ag. No use tryin' t' explain things to a woman." She was as thick-headed, he told himself, as some of those fool policemen downstairs.

Avery was on the verge of making a clean breast of his midnight visit to the drugstore. He imagined himself crying out: "Stop! You are all wrong." Suddenly the weird terror of that sinister figure he had seen last night gripped him. What vengeance would not that maleficent spectre wreak on him if he revealed their encounter!

Toward evening the truth wrenched itself out of him. Significantly enough, it was not his father or mother, but that more sympathetic listener, Bert Don-

nelly, who with many interjections of amazement, first listened to the story.

Then everybody knew of it with incredible rapidity. Herman Zell completely forgot for the space of five minutes his outstanding rule of never betraying surprise at any news; and no one was deceived by his subsequent assertion that he had heard Avery depart and return the night before, but had refrained from disclosure because he thought the boy might have had something to do with the shooting and — “I’ll leave it to you, officer, if you wouldn’t protect your own kid, if you was in my place.” Agatha dissolved, of course, into immediate hysteria; doubtless she would have fainted, had there been appreciative spectators at hand. Unprecedented respect tinged even Winifred’s attitude toward Avery. For the past three days, indeed, he had found it hardly necessary to take notice of Harold Zimmerman, the new boy, Aubrey Milhollin, and the rest of his usual associates.

But the policemen! Their deferential devoirs to him! Even that feared obstructionist, the officer on the beat, viewed him with solicitous regard. Yet Avery was beginning to recognize subconsciously that no sensation can long remain sensational: his first visit to police headquarters, two nights ago, had impregnated him — permanently, he thought — with mingled dread and self-esteem; yet only this morning, he had prosecuted his semi-daily task of identifying prisoners with a self-assurance that was almost genuine. This, too, in face of the fact that on the first two days, he was able to decide at once that none of the suspects

could possibly be the malign spirit that had taken form from out the darkened doorway; while this morning, they had brought before him Trunsky himself — Trunsky, the moron, the epileptic, who was known to have expressed some inexplicable grievance against Fred Gallagher — Trunsky, whose checked suit and straw hat had been found almost completely burned up in the furnace at his rooming house. Here at last stood the evil apparition.

"That cinches it," said the detective-lieutenant, and yawned.

Excitement fell away incredibly fast. The police officials scarcely noticed Avery's departure. The afternoon papers, head-lining Trunsky's confession, did not deign to mention Avery's identification. In another week, the city would have forgotten the murder, and resumed its undisturbed inquiry into the relative merits of Mr. William McKinley and Mr. William Jennings Bryan.

The beat-policeman, his red face and neck shiny with perspiration, now walked majestically past the contemplative Avery without his recent stare of friendly interest. The boy on the doorstep had shrunk into a potentially troublesome kid again. Avery's vague despondency assumed more definite form: he wanted intensely to remain an outstanding, romantic figure of interest, a super-boy; he resented being thrust back into the drab, monotonous ranks of insignificance.

He might reasonably have expected to remain the cynosure of at least his own family's regard a little

longer. Yet even this was denied him. Old Thomas Holmes had fallen ill of some mysterious brain disease the very day after the murder. His malady had competed doughtily with Avery's exploit for Agatha's apprehension, from the very first; and now, with the murderer caught, Thomas Holmes held the spotlight alone. Mrs. Zell was at her father's house this very moment, when she ought to have been, figuratively, genuflecting before her son. Herman Zell's interest in Avery's exploit had been tinged from the outset with the feeling that he, Herman, in some unexplained way, deserved all the glory. His highest praise of his son took the form of asseverations that after all, Avery did "take after his old man." But now Herman too had forgotten his son's renown, in solicitude for the ailing Thomas Holmes. He had been home every night since his father-in-law's illness commenced. Twice he had taken his wife for a ride in one of the Ege phaetons, behind the now mature and phlegmatic Bess. He seemed to have become the model husband.

.

Abruptly, Avery — sitting meditatively on his doorstep — concluded he had occupied his station of solitary splendour long enough. He would descend to the stratum of average boyhood. Besides, he visualized the untapped reservoirs of admiration that awaited him when he rejoined his confreres.

He ran diagonally across Beech Street, darted into the Zimmerman back yard and entered the barn at the rear. Four whistled notes issued from his lips. From the second floor descended a similar signal.

The round, slightly effeminate face of Harold Zimmerman appeared through the aperture at the top of the ladder.

"It's Ave," he said. "C'mon up!"

Avery, having mounted the ladder with dignity, was surprised to find Aubrey Milhollin and a strange youth standing underneath the horizontal bar that constituted the principal equipment of the Beech Street Athletic Club. All three boys gave evidence of violent muscular exercise.

"This kid is my cousin, Harry Broomhall," introduced Zimmie. "He lives in a town called Hamburg."

"What right have these kids got in the club rooms?" demanded Avery.

Zimmie betrayed irritation. "Why, my cousin's a guest of the Club — an' Aubrey's a member."

"A member! How'd he get t' be a member?"

"How'd he get t' be a member? Why, I 'nitiated him myself yesterday."

This was a blow. Ever since the advent of the Milhollin family to the neighbourhood, he had looked forward with keen anticipation to the initiation of the tow-headed Aubrey, certain contours of whose person seemed fairly to beg for chastisement.

"You got no right t' 'nitate him all by yourself. He's got t' be 'nitiated over again."

"Course I got the right!"

"Why, you little liar, you! Look at the by-laws."

"Say, whose barn is this, anyway? All I got t' do

is tell my mother you said I was a liar, an' I guess you won't play here any more."

Was this a fitting reception for the boy hero of the Gallagher murder? Was this the adulation — yes, the reverence — that was rightfully his? Had Harold Zimmerman identified the man who killed Fred Gallagher? Avery sniffed.

Still, it is sometimes expedient for real heroes to be diplomatic.

"What you been doin'?" he deftly diverged, with a glance up at the horizontal bar.

"Practisin' the kippie," divulged Zimmie.

"Lessee you."

Avery welcomed the athletic competition that ensued. He knew he could outshine the unproficient Zimmie. Aubrey Millhollin proved less adept; he could not even do the second part of "skinning the cat." But Zimmie's cousin rudely displaced Avery as the club champion. The boy from the country could chin himself twelve times, could elbow himself up on the bar surprisingly, and could even accomplish the "grand muscle grind."

"See what I got?" Avery determined upon a new field of activity; he drew forth Dr. Boomer's brochure on the "chronic diseases of men."

"That's nothin'," vaunted Aubrey Mulhollin. Both he and Zimmie produced similar pamphlets from their coat pockets.

But here again Harry Broomhall, the small town boy, took easy precedence. He knew all the common barnyard aspects of life. He could interpret a fair

share of Doctor Boomer's pronouncements. More than that, he had an amazing stock of stories about the girls of his home town, gleaned from youths slightly older than himself. He feigned the indifference of a blasé man of the world. They had to ply him with timid, venturing queries.

The voice of Mrs. Zimmerman, summoning her male offspring to supper, brought the small town boy's dissertations to a close. One by one they silently descended from the gymnasium of the Beech Street Athletic Club and separated, each taking his new and provocative knowledge home for solitary digestion.

In spite of his preoccupation, Avery continued to cherish his thwarted herohood, and a smouldering irritation because the other boys had failed to render suitable homage. They had not even mentioned the murder; one might suppose that poor Fred Gallagher was still alive, instead of lying in his coffin behind the crape-bedight door of the Gallagher cottage.

A last crushing indignity awaited him. Beech Street lay midway between the camps of the two largest and most inimical gangs of the city, the Dudes and the Micks. The Micks hailed from "Corktown," three blocks east; the Dudes held forth a similar distance west, in more cultured precincts. Theoretically, Avery and his mates belonged to neither faction, being a few years too young; actually, they were recognized as vassals under the protection of the Dudes.

As Avery and Aubrey Milhollin started to cross Beech Street, four Micks rounded the corner of the drugstore and swooped down upon the easy prey.

The fat Aubrey disappeared into the Zimmerman yard with astonishing agility. Avery customarily sought safety in similar frank flight, but today he held his ground. A hero must know no fear. The four Micks stopped in paralysed surprise; this was the first time in history a Beech Street "mamma's pet" had failed to take to his heels.

"Smash him one on his damn beak, Aloysius!" suggested the tallest Mick.

Aloysius swung a minatory fist toward the hero. Avery partly dodged; the Aloysian fist struck him in the back. By now, his conceptions of heroism were rapidly melting away in the pitiless light of actuality.

He turned to run. Just then a blur of white passed across his vision. He heard screams of rage, a muffled shout of consternation. Turning around, he beheld an astounding sight. Three of the Micks were half-way across the street in disordered flight, while upon the bewildered Aloysius his own sister, Winifred, had launched a deadly attack. The red face of Avery's late assailant was already scratched and bleeding. The encounter was brief: Aloysius somehow found his legs and achieved abject escape around the corner.

"You leave my brother alone, you —" Winifred screeched after him.

Avery stood as if in a trance. It was disheartening enough to have felt his glory slipping from his shoulders — to have been outshone by a "rube" from the country. It was atrocious that the Micks should dare lay hands upon a civic hero. But to be rescued

by a girl — to have his own sister put his victorious assailant to flight — better the wounds of honourable defeat! He said:

“Can’t you leave a fellow alone? I could’ve licked him easy.” But his tone did not carry conviction.

The light of frantic courage subsided from Winifred’s eyes. She now bethought herself to address him with sisterly condescension:

“Mamma wants you to come right home. Grandpa Holmes is worse.”

Chapter Two: The Divorce

I.

WHEN Avery turned into Beech Street on his way home from school, he observed with a sense of surprise that his father stood at the street door of the flat engaged in an apparent argument with Bert Donnelly. Almost at once, Herman shunted the smaller man aside and entered the lower hallway. The druggist, in his shirtsleeves in spite of the crisp November air, looked worried, then shrugged his shoulders and returned to the store.

Herman Zell was not a familiar figure these days. Since the hot August afternoon when the lawyer read Thomas Holmes' will to all of them, Avery had seen his father only three times. Herman insisted that the provisions of the will were a deadly insult to him. The size of the estate was disappointing enough; Thomas Holmes' later timber investments had been unfortunate, and he left only about seventy-five thousand dollars; but the circumstance that so sorely galled Herman was his father-in-law's failure to make any substantial bequest to Agatha. Herman had hardly expected any gift to himself, for Thomas Holmes' contempt for him had remained uncomfortably obvious until the end; but for years he had looked forward to

the day when his wife should become independently rich. He had little doubt as to his ability to secure from Agatha an endowment suitable for the maintenance of a gentleman of great social potentialities, whose development had always been cramped for want of funds.

Had Thomas Holmes devised and bequeathed all his property to his wife, Herman would have felt sufficiently thwarted; yet he might at least have solaced himself with the thought that his day had been merely postponed. But the shrewd old lumberman had forestalled all possibility of his detested son-in-law's ever laying hands on his hard-won wealth. His will provided for successive life estates in his wife and daughter; upon Mrs. Zell's demise, the residue would descend to Avery and Winifred.

Avery found great difficulty in understanding just why his father felt so bitterly aggrieved, yet somehow Herman's first heartfelt bellowings were very persuasive.

"It ain't that I give a damn for myself," his father kept vociferating with increasing self-conviction. "I wouldn't touch a penny of it. It's just the insult of the thing."

No doubt persisted in Avery's mind that in some mysterious way a great wrong had been done his father. He felt very sorry for him; he almost shed tears when Herman, with a mien of high tragedy, announced that he could no longer remain under any roof owned by the man who had so wronged him, that he would take his broken spirit out into the lonely

world. Agatha Zell wept frantically. Winifred whimpered.

Nearly two months had passed. Herman had dragged his bleeding soul back to the flat once or twice in the interim, but Avery had not seen him. Today, his eyes brightened when he beheld his father entering the doorway; he broke into a run. As he came nearer, the outer rim of his optical consciousness became aware of the lanky figure of Mrs. Angus Griffiths standing on her doorstep, observing the exterior of the Zell flat with undisguised interest.

Up the familiar stairs he pounded and into the hallway, then halted. His father was not in the hallway or in the sitting-room. His father's hat did not hang on the hall-tree. Avery listened intently. The sound of a drawer being opened came from the bedroom to the left. The door was slightly ajar, and he entered.

Herman was on his knees in front of the lowest drawer of Agatha Zell's bureau. His hands searched impatiently among the disordered articles of clothing. A few limp stockings dangled from the side of the drawer where the searcher had thrust them.

With a startled movement, he looked around at his welcoming son. Avery stopped abruptly. Herman's expression was heavy, dogged, menacing. His sorrel eyes were luminous and bloodshot — Avery was suddenly reminded of the Sunday afternoon sleigh-race.

"Git out a here — gwan!" The voice was inarticulately thick.

Avery retreated, his lower lip protruding dismally. It seemed to him he stood in the hallway outside, un-

certain what to do, for five minutes before the street door below opened and closed, and he heard his mother and sister start up the stairs. Winifred's wide-open eyes stared from behind her mother's skirt; her front teeth protruded more conspicuously than ever. Agatha Zell's usual apprehension seemed multiplied a hundred-fold.

"Bert says your father's up here, drunk."

Avery nodded solemnly. "He's in there."

"What's he doing — did you see?"

"Lookin' in the bureau drawer 'r something."

The bedroom door opened, and Herman Zell surveyed his family with a demeanour half sodden, half triumphant.

"Herman!" gasped Agatha. "What have you been doing?"

"'T's aw-right."

"Come on in here and sit down — let me put you to bed and get you some tea," constrained Agatha.

But Herman started unsteadily down the stairway.

"'T's aw-right, I say. Woman sets her father again' her husband. I know all 'bout you, Ag — can't fool me."

Mrs. Zell burst into hysterical weeping. "Set my father against you! Oh, come back, Herman! I never did. Don't go out on the street that way, for the sake of the children."

The slamming of the street door punctuated her importunities. Sobbing she rushed to the front window, Avery and Winifred behind her, just in time to see the household's master ricochet along the brick

wall and around the corner. Across Beech Street still loomed the sentinel figure of Mrs. Angus Griffiths, unabashedly observant.

Avery's mother sat abruptly upon the stationary rocker, masked her face — with the exception of her prodigious nose — under her ringed hands, and cried loudly and heart-brokenly. Just as suddenly, she ceased her weeping, stood up and hurried to the bedroom. The children found her lifting the mattress on one side.

She gave forth one terrible moan that quite bedimmed her earlier distress. Her face seemed grotesquely contorted.

"It's gone! I'll have him arrested, I will. He's stolen one hundred dollars!"

At supper that night, her sense of bitter injustice flamed up anew when Winifred reported that Florence Griffiths had been cautioned by her mother not to play with the Zell children any more.

"An' Mrs. Griffiths told Amy Zimmerman's mother she didn't blame Mr. Zell, poor man, with such a wife!"

Avery, for his part, ate his bread-and-butter and preserves, and listened to his mother's angry complaints in complete silence. Yet he too had had his cross to bear. Aubrey Milhollin and Harold Zimmerman had greeted him that afternoon with just a trace of thoughtful reserve in their manner.

"Say!" Zimmie blurted out after a moment. "Say, your father come home drunk 's afternoon, didn't he?"

2.

The multiple lights of the Berghof House gave a metropolitan air to the small triangular park through which Avery and his mother cautiously made their way back and forth. Always they kept their eyes on the brilliant entrance-way of the hotel.

"If she's in there with him, they've got to come out sooner or later," his mother argued.

His fervent hope was that they would not come out. He was tired — it was almost nine o'clock; he wanted to go home; he cherished a disturbing fear his mother would make a scene, perhaps scratch the other lady's face, scream a great deal and then faint. For scenes like this, he had no stomach. It seemed to him he had heard nothing but weeping and lamentation for the last two weeks — ever since the memorable episode of the missing hundred dollars.

The climax came this very morning, when Mrs. Ferguson, who lived two doors away in the large brick house, paid Mrs. Zell a visit. Mr. Ferguson had encountered Herman the afternoon before in the vicinity of the Berghof House, attired in the height of fashion, and — alas, to say — accompanied by some unrecognized woman, also very elegantly accoutered and bearing damning and tell-tale traces of rouge.

"I considered it my duty as a woman and as a neighbour to tell you this, Mrs. Zell," concluded Mrs. Ferguson, looking very virtuous.

When her informant had departed, Agatha's piteous cries reverberated once more through the Zell flat.

The two children stood about, miserable — not comprehending clearly the exact nature of the tragedy. Avery made a tentative movement toward the street door, but his mother called him back with an aggrieved complaint:

"So you want to desert your mother too, just when she needs you most." He gathered some strange canon of filial duty required him to remain and be wrung by his mother's hysterical grief.

Presently articulate expression began to break through her tumultuous sobbing.

"He can't throw me to one side — like an old shoe . . . while he's off with another woman . . . living high on my money."

Her involuntary audience listened to her outpourings with heavy hearts, hardly daring to move for fear of bringing down upon themselves the implication of disloyalty. Winifred wept silently. Avery racked his brain for something solacing.

"Maybe papa don't mean to do anything bad," he finally ventured.

"Don't mean to do anything bad!" Agatha Zell's righteous indignation abruptly cut off her flow of tears. "Don't mean to!" She surveyed her son with withering scornfulness. "Is that any excuse? If what he's doing 's all right, I s'pose I can get a man in here to live with me, and you can get a girl — and no one could say a word, as long as we didn't mean to do anything wrong!"

He could not recognize the parallel. For his part, he couldn't for the life of him see the desirability of

importing some girl for his benefit. He didn't like girls. One of them around the house was enough — in fact, he frequently felt that he could dispense with Winifred without the slightest inconvenience. None the less, he perceived himself impaled upon his mother's obvious resentment. It was far more discreet, he judged, to proffer no further extenuations for his father.

Gradually, indeed, his former genuine admiration for the recreant Herman had worn away under the stress of his mother's criminations. No woman, he was led to believe, had ever been so grievously and inexcusably wronged. And he, Avery, was her sole surviving male champion; always he must be on the alert to protect her, to avenge the disgrace his father had brought upon them all.

With evening, Agatha's intolerable feeling of suspense, her rankling jealousy, had driven her forth to spy upon her faithless spouse. At her side trudged her newly anointed protector. The first snow of the winter descended upon them and expired ingloriously the instant of finding haven. Avery's first high chivalry melted away almost as rapidly. He could not imagine himself standing up against his father's wrath; yet if he did not live up to his enforced rôle as his mother's defender, she would accuse him of taking his father's part. Whatever he did was certain to get him into difficulty. He felt wretchedly caught between two implacable forces. And this mysterious lady with the rouge — he had no quarrel with her. He dreaded having his mother start a fight with her,

right in front of the brilliantly lighted Berghof House. The whole prospect was extremely dismal.

Still Agatha would not go home. Occasionally men would ogle her hopefully, then pass on sheepishly when their eyes encountered Avery. A policeman began eyeing them suspiciously. Even Agatha felt the increasing difficulty of their position.

"There he comes!" Her sharp exclamation found them at the upper end of the park. Avery followed his mother's feverish gaze. With consternation he identified a large overcoated figure approaching the hotel from the opposite direction; a woman on his arm. Agatha had started across the street with her first cry of recognition; now she was hurrying toward that gay entrance-way so rapidly that her diminutive protector was being dragged along behind her at a half-trot. He was in the blackest depths; his hopes that the clash might not occur had been in vain. He visualized the few angry words, his mother's scream as she "pitched into" the other lady, his father's bellowing oaths, the quick onrush of spectators, the descent of that prehensile policeman, the patrol-wagon. If only his mother would loose that inexorable grip about his wrist!

Manifestly the guilty pair were much nearer the front door of the Berghof House than the avenging wife and her craven paladin. Agatha fairly ran the last few steps.

Avery's heart all at once seemed to begin functioning again; an immense relief relaxed his terror. At the very door of the hotel, the man in the overcoat glanced negligently toward his would-be assailants; the

light from within fell across his face for the first time distinctly. Sybarite — faithless husband, even — he may have been; but Herman Zell, quite incontestably, he was not.

The helmet and brass-buttoned overcoat of the diligent patrolman proceeded meaningfully toward them from the park. In that instant, Agatha confessed defeat. Avery still manacled to her side, she swept by the Berghof House's glittering lobby for the last time.

"We might as well go home, I guess," she said.

3

Avery's second pilgrimage to the Berghof House, the next afternoon, gashed a deeper wound into his youthful sensibilities than any of the other episodes in the domestic drama whose curtain had been rung up by the demise of Thomas Holmes.

The stratagem found conception in the tormented brain of his mother. That morning, she had summoned a council. Avery's grandmother, grown suddenly feeble since her husband's death, came to the flat. Mrs. Ferguson arrived unbidden; but Agatha had confidence in her discretion and she needed confidantes badly.

Divorce, in the year 1896, hardly offered an easy, conventional, respectable solution of domestic stalemate. The word connotated disgrace in the first degree; a divorced woman was almost a pariah, no matter what her justification. Yet Jane Holmes urged divorce proceedings at once. She had tolerated Her-

man Zell these many years, only for her daughter's sake.

"I've seen this coming ever since you married him," she said. "The very best thing you can do is to get rid of him, once and for all; then forget him."

The baldness of the suggestion aroused a peculiar reaction in her daughter. Had she defended the recreant Herman by so much as an intonation, Agatha would have flown at her fiercely; but now she fairly palliated his misdemeanours.

"There's many a man has gone astray after some low woman," she insisted. "All he needs is something to bring him to his senses. I mean something to remind him of a good woman's love." She extracted her damp handkerchief once more.

To Mrs. Holmes's decisive head-shaking, Mrs. Ferguson volunteered:

"He'll come back to you all right, Mrs. Zell — mark my word. It's a Christian wife's duty to love an' watch an' pray. You wouldn't have a friend left on the block if you got a divorce."

Those ever-present spectators of the drama, Avery and Winifred, sat in their chairs and listened. They now heard themselves once more brought into the controversy.

"And your children," added Mrs. Ferguson with final conviction. "You got to think of their future. They'd be disgraced for life." She turned toward Avery and Winifred and surveyed them so sadly that they felt like souls already lost.

The policy of Christian forbearance and watchful

waiting seemed to have prevailed. Yet no sooner had her advisors taken their melancholy departure than Agatha began to develop her new plan. And indeed, how could any wife, however virtuous and Christian, be expected to sit with folded hands while her own husband dallied with the rouged Delilah?

Avery's dismay had some small ingredient of amazement, when his mother first broached the project. His father had been held up to him for a fortnight as a sinner, a scoundrel, a viper. Even Herman's name had been proscribed; he was referred to as "he," "that man," and "your father." By this time he was completely convinced of the religious duty of hating his father. Yet now his mother was suggesting that he go to the errant head of the household and persuade him to return home. The marrow of the idea was some affectionate demonstration that would touch his father, and let him see how dearly they all loved him — would dissolve his father into tears and bring him home penitent and reformed.

"But, mamma —" Avery's brow was puckered with alarm and disinclination.

He proceeded no further. His mother's glaring eye, full of incipient accusation, checked him. To argue would only convict him of disloyalty to her.

Agatha dressed her reluctant decoy in his Sunday suit, a clean shirt and his new pair of button-shoes, and sent him forth. He felt like a lamb, freshly bathed and beribboned, conducted to the whetted knife of the sacrificial altar. His gay attire contrasted mockingly with his heavy heart. He had no faith in the suc-

cess of the absurd enterprise. As he opened the street door, he looked back wistfully up the stairs and beheld his mother's expression, triumphantly expectant. All too apparently, her thoughts dwelt solely on the success of the expedition; no comprehension of her son's youthful agony shone tenderly from her eyes.

But it is not given a twelve-year-old boy to doubt the mysterious wisdom of his mother's biddings. Avery drew the door shut after him and walked unfalteringly down Beech Street. Unfalteringly, at least, until he was beyond the surveillance of those bay window lace-curtains. From that point on, his loitering increased in inverse ratio to the remaining distance he must travel. He contemplated, with thoughtful favour, the possibility of an intentional fall upon the sidewalk; if he could manage to skin his knee badly enough, his mother would have to renounce the manœuvre. But a wretched indecisiveness gripped him and brought his lagging feet at last to the little triangular park that fronted the Berghof House.

His was no brazen spirit. He possessed no qualification for his task; he could not pretend a tearful affection for the father he had so lately been told to loathe. He dared not seek out his erring parent. Likewise he dared not face his mother without having seen his father. His emotion of the night before paralysed him—the feeling that somehow he was trapped, helpless, soon to be crushed between two unslakable, converging hatreds. Subconsciously he recognized himself as the catspaw, the tempting bait with which his mother hoped to appease her injured pride.

He hesitated miserably before those august portals. At intervals his lips mumbled the phrases of entreaty Agatha Zell had instilled in his memory. The more he walked, the more his new shoes hurt his feet; his heels in particular seemed two burning blisters.

He realized he could delay no longer. The first suggestion of twilight invaded the park. A light or two flamed in the upper floors of the hotel. He forced himself through the front entrance-way, and in accordance with his mother's directions, addressed the clerk:

"Is Mr. Zell in?"

The clerk paid no attention to Avery until he had lighted the gas jet over the desk. The yellowish glare shone down upon his glistening, immaculately em-banked hair. He glanced easily toward the rows of pigeonholes at the back of the office, then removed his cigar and spat.

"Nope."

Avery almost ran to the door. He had fulfilled his filial duty to the utmost. He could return to the flat once more, unsullied by either cowardice or disobedience.

A block from the Berghof House, he suddenly met Herman Zell. He stopped short, almost retreated. With his father promenaded the lady. She was veiled, and he could not satisfy himself on the mooted question of rouge. She was staring at him unamiably.

Through Avery's open mouth flowed involuntarily the first syllables of his long-rehearsed appeal:

"Please, papa, won't you come home —"

Herman's heavy eyebrows lowered with the black temper his son knew so well. He stepped threateningly toward the suppliant.

"Git out-a here, you little brat!" he raged between set teeth. "An' tell that hell-cat who sent you here, if I ever catch you papa-ing me again, she'll get you back in a hearse. Scoot!"

Avery nevertheless remained on the spot, transfixed, his eyes staring, his lower jaw sagging woebe-gonely. Restive distaste exuded from the posture of the veiled lady. Herman took one more step toward his palsied offspring, drew back his hand. The lady intervened sharply:

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Eustace!" Her voice was shrilly authoritative. "Come along."

Avery's heartbroken recital evoked little commiseration from his mother. Her pity she reserved principally for her own wronged self. And what roused her hottest indignation was her inconstant mate's *nom d' amour*.

"'Eustace!'" Anger, acerbated virtue, jealousy, outraged parsimony, all reared their heads in that one tone. "'Eustace!' And spending my money on that low creature. I don't suppose she even knew he had a wife!"

Avery refrained from references to hell-cats.

4

After having gloated through her lace-curtains for so many years over the shortcomings, the follies and the misfortunes of Beech Street, Agatha Zell now

found the neighbourhood drama suddenly re-cast. She it was who was being gloated over, or at best, pitied. Her helpless writhing it was that entranced and entertained the crowded amphitheatre. That dearest enemy of hers, Mrs. Angus Griffiths, for countless seasons the victim of Agatha's busy tongue, now betrayed a smile of bitter triumph; from morning to night it seemed, she carried her accusing whispers from neighbour to neighbour. "Of course, I don't *mean* to *insinuate* — You won't tell a *soul*, I'm sure." Most of the residents of the block, curious, frankly interested in the spectacle of domestic scandal, were ready to condemn Agatha. The lachrymose pity of Mrs. Ferguson and a few others was almost as hard to endure.

Poor Agatha was becoming a tragic figure. She had always experienced a thrill of very intense and peculiarly feminine pride in the continued possession of so robust, handsome and manly a man as Herman. The fact somehow diminished that grievous handicap, the Holmes nose — subtly laid the ghost of those long years of uncourted spinsterhood — comforted and gave grateful reassurance to the very inmost heart of her womanhood. Herman was the living, irrefragable evidence of Agatha's power to charm and subjugate the incomprehensible male. But now that was all gone; the too obvious truth that Herman had succumbed, not to maiden charm and beauty, but to the alluring promise of facile pelf, gained ground — and there was no Herman to put it to flight.

Yet none but Herman would suffice. Therefore he must be re-apprehended in some clever, but not yet

determined, manner. His theft of her money, his regrettable alliance with "that low creature," even his subjection of her to neighbourhood ridicule, could be — yes, would be — overlooked if only he would return. She did not insist, in the last analysis, upon his actually loving her; she almost admitted to herself he never had; but he must act as if he did, at least in public. She might even make him some definite money allowance.

Agatha's jaw became more and more set. Yes; Herman must come back. She was not at all discouraged by her first reverses. The campaign was far from lost.

Forthwith she launched a series of endearing, coaxing epistles to her absent lord — letters full of wifely devotion and entreaty, of touching reminders of their life together. It seemed hardly credible that Herman could fail to be melted by these daily appeals to his better nature; all day long she watched the street below; she scarcely slept for awaiting the prodigal's footsteps on the stairs: yet the unbelievable persisted. Moving anecdotes of the children crept into her letters: their loneliness, their constant inquiries for "papa." Toward the end of the fortnight, Agatha had reached the stage of imploring her husband's forgiveness — for just what, she could not have said. Such was the measure of her impatient over-anxiety.

This promising procedure reached sudden futility, however, when Herman began sending back her letters unopened. This rude rebuff must have quenched the determination of a less intent woman; but Agatha

burned with a fiercer craving than before. For a few days she simmered with abeyant purpose; Avery watched her plotting eye apprehensively, wondering whether or not he was about to be once more dangled as a puppet before his recalcitrant father.

On the following Sunday morning, his mother's purpose crystallized. She announced that all three of them were to seek out Herman in his room at the Berg-hof House. Face to face with his wronged but forgiving family, he must weaken, must awake from the evil spell that bound him. The spectacle of his wife and children must certainly restore him to sanity. In later years he could never thank her enough for her courage and wisdom. Thus reasoned the insatiable Agatha.

Neither child dared demur. After all, Avery perceived, there was a certain potency in numbers. Nothing could have driven him back to the hotel alone; but the presence of his mother and Winifred somehow divided the responsibility.

This curious invading force paused at the doorway inscribed "Ladies' Entrance": Agatha gotten up with an effect of drooping pensiveness; the two children, on the contrary, fairly shining with recent soap-and-water and Sunday spick-and-spanness. They entered hurriedly and slipped into the hotel elevator. Agatha had wisely decided to take no chance of defeat at the hands of a forewarned room-clerk; in some inscrutable manner she had learned the exact whereabouts of the perfidious "Eustace's" room.

"Fourth floor," she told the negro elevator boy.

They disembarked into a dark, thickly carpeted corridor. At one end burned a red-globed gas-light dimly illuminating a painted tin sign: "Fire Escape." The corridor became a maze of labyrinths through which their mother led them interrogatively. The air was humid and stale with Saturday night cigar smoke.

They could sense the nearing of their goal. A flat-faced chambermaid encountered them with disillusioned unfriendliness, and Agatha halted them around a corner until she had vanished. The whole world seemed oddly muffled by that thick carpet, that fetid air — but now a woman's shrill laugh came through an open transom window; through another rasped a man's snore, stertorous, strangulated, as from a tormented soul. All at once, the illusion of solitude had vanished. Avery could feel the close, stifling proximity of a hundred human beings. He couldn't help thinking how funny it would be if all those partitions could suddenly be drawn up by some mysterious, giant hand, and all these people, abruptly bereft of their few cubic feet of privacy, should find themselves staring perplexedly into each other's inexpectant faces. What a droll motley of beds and bureaus, side by side or back to back. What a screaming and rushing to and fro —

"Sh!" whispered his mother tensely. He was back in the world of grim realities, of incomprehensible woe and quarrelling and disgrace — standing with his mother and sister in front of a door that bore the dingy scroll figures: "417."

Agatha squinted through the key-hole and put her

ear to the door. The uncertain light from a near-by chandelier cast deep shadows under her high cheekbones. Her face looked drawn.

No sound reached them from within.

His mother knocked decisively, yet casually. They heard steps, a key squeaking in the lock; and the door was opened. With a little cry, his mother rushed into the room, the two children at her skirts.

The sunlight on the floor partly blinded Avery; but when he turned around, his consciousness caught a clear photograph of his father. Herman stood at the opened door, surprise rapidly surrendering to exasperation in his muddy brown eyes. His face was partly covered with lather; in his left hand he gripped a razor. He was coatless and collarless. His turned-up shirt-sleeves revealed a red flannel undershirt. Over the foot of the wooden bedstead, at his side, lay limply his flannel chest-protector — for Herman, outwardly the perfect male, had always secretly imagined some insidious weakness in his lungs.

The quartet hung immobile an instant.

No penitence, no signs of rescued sanity, softened Herman's rolling, increasingly belligerent eye. Then Agatha determined to execute her sure-fire *coup*. With another cry she rushed toward her husband. Herman, caught between the door and the bed, tried too late to evade her. She sank to her knees before him, and clasped him, not around the waist as she had planned, but by his pendent suspenders. The two children, carefully coached, flung themselves on either side of their mother, in attitudes of prostrate entreaty.

Simultaneously, all three suppliants burst into torrential, noisy tears.

"Damn!" said Herman.

"Oh, Herman!" sobbed Agatha again and again. "Forgive me!"

"Papa, come home with us," chanted the children at frequent intervals.

The indecision of the beleaguered husband and father at last boiled over into passionate fury; and from that point on, it cannot be gainsaid that his manœuvres were forceful and effective. Emitting horrible imprecations, he broke through the encircling ring of besiegers, tossed his razor on the bed, ejected the two children with neat despatch, then wheeled upon the still kneeling Agatha.

"Get out, damn you!" He seized her by the wrist.

Her voice became more genuinely supplicating, with a queer note of female pride in his strength. "Oh, Herman, don't! You're breaking my arm."

In another instant, the weeping children in the hallway beheld their mother pushed roughly out of the room, and the door slammed shut. The key once more squeaked in the lock. Avery's corduroy hat, brushed from his head during the scuffle, was hurled through the transom window and fell at his feet.

Down the corridor appeared the indistinct figure of the chambermaid. She surveyed the whimpering children and their slightly disarrayed mother with definite suspicion.

"Say — who youse lookin' for?"

Agatha capitulated. "Oh!" she extemporized, "I

asked for the third floor and he put me off on the fourth. I got the wrong room."

Thus ingloriously culminated the several major offensives looking toward the subjugation and redemption of the intransigent Herman.

5

Agatha's campaign became defensive after a plain, unflattering talk from her very intelligent mother.

Mrs. Zell, as usual, had called the children into the room; but Mrs. Holmes insisted on banishing them. "They look as if they'd had enough of this mess stuffed down their throats," she said.

But the parlour door which she closed after them sprung open unnoticed, and Avery stole back to listen.

"Really, my dear," his grandmother was saying. "I do think you ought to spare the children from all this. They positively gave me a shock, they look so badly. First thing you know, you'll have taken all the spirit out of them. Avery, especially. He's like a little weazened-up old man already."

The eavesdropper swelled with emotion. It was good to have a little understanding, a little sympathy, once more.

"Do you really think so?" his mother asked in tones of shocked protest. Once more she began crying.

He looked cautiously round the edge of the door. His grandmother's beautifully ordered hair escaped snow white from the mourning veil that flowed down from her bonnet. Her grave, benevolent, sage profile stood out startling against the mahogany of the up-

right piano. Her lips moved again, her deep-set dark eyes stirred.

"Pawns in a hateful game — poor little dears."

Avery heard the low-spoken words without enlightenment, but his heart was full of dumb gratitude, an intense fealty.

Presently Jane Holmes resumed her counsel:

"I'm afraid you haven't been handling Mr. Herman Zell quite intelligently. You know, it doesn't pay to run after any man — least of all, a headstrong man. It's poor policy. By this time, he's probably convinced he's indispensable, that he's been in the right from the first and you in the wrong. No, my dear, you must learn to wait, to be patient: that's a woman's best rôle. The longer you keep away from him, the less certain he is of himself. Make him come to you, *I* say. Better yet, don't let him in, the first time he comes home, nor the second. Let *him* do a little worrying — that is, if you really want him back. Of course, you know what *I* think: the sooner you get rid of him, the better."

Within the next twenty-four hours a new lock displaced the old in the street door of the Zell flat. Agatha had taken heed. There were no further sor-ties upon the Berghof House. The children lost a little their look of apprehensive dread.

Both of them realized nevertheless that the shadow of some strange disgrace rested deeply over them. Winifred came home weeping bitterly one afternoon. Her playmates had suddenly started whispering to some new little girl, manifestly about Winifred.

"They were telling her something about me," she wailed. "They kept looking at me all the time. I think it was about — about *him*."

Avery, too, discovered embarrassing aspects. For example, when the Milhollin youth, dilating upon biblical history, proclaimed that his father was almost as strong as Samson.

"Last night he pulled a heavy trunk up into the attic for my mother. With one hand!"

"That's nothin'!" belittled Harold Zimmerman. Each of the four boys in the group racked his recollection for examples of paternal prowess.

"Nothin'!" repeated Aubrey Milhollin with nettled chagrin. "It ain't, hey? Why, you couldn't've budged it. You ought 've seen him. He can do *anything*!"

Into Avery's mind flickered the exultant memory of his father's mighty feat in throwing the runaway Bess.

"Huh!" he sneered. "Why, *my* father —"

He stopped short. The air seemed suddenly splintered with one of those psychological cataclysms that succeed the grossest of *faux pas*. The three boys stared open-mouthed. Avery's face grew hot; he had the feeling of a sudden withdrawal of strength. If a boy can't brag about his father —

"*Your* father!" snorted the roly-poly scion of Milhollin. "Why, *your* father —"

"Shut up!" commanded Leo Gallagher, who was older, and by that token, surcharged with the exigencies of good form.

Pariahs brother and sister had unmistakably be-

come for some obscure fault that was none the less inexorable for their inability to comprehend it. They felt themselves abnormal, different from other children in some strange way. A consciousness of black disgrace slowly pervaded them. In the presence of strangers they became aware of a sense of hypocrisy, of the urgent necessity at all costs of covering up the deep stain. "Does *he* know?" "Has somebody told *her*, I wonder?"

There had to be brighter phases. Of these, none came so gratefully to Agatha and the children, and with so great an unexpectedness, as the unrestrained burst of friendliness from Bert Donnelly, the druggist — gratefully, because he was a man and resourceful; unexpectedly, because he and Herman were counted boon friends.

"Understand, I got no quarrel with Herm," Bert volunteered. "He and I's always been friends. But he's done wrong thing this time, an' I'm against him till he makes it right, Mrs. Zell. A man's got t' be on the level with his wife and kids."

He had left the store and came up to the flat to offer his services.

"I know Herm pretty well. I got him sized up. Maybe I can help you. I'll keep my eyes and ears open anyway. If the time comes when you need me, I'll be all ready."

The proffered support of the sympathetic little druggist relieved Agatha ineffably. She lost most of her fear of Herman; at worst, she could probably delay any serious casualties until Bert Donnelly brought help.

Some ten days after the inauguration of her defensive campaign — Sunday noon, precisely — the druggist brought the first news of Herman.

"He was here while you was at church, Mrs. Zell — tried to get in. Gosh, you ought 've heard him cussin' when his key wouldn't work." Bert differentiated: Herman was not drunk, but he had been drinking. Afterwards, he had bared his grievances to Bert.

"Claims you lied about him to your father because you was afraid he'd get some of Mr. Holmes' money. Claims it's rightfully his and you're hidin' it. Sounded foolish to me. He figured he'd get in an' maybe find some of this money while you was out." Her ally became more sober. "Have you really got much money up there? Because if you have, Mrs. Zell, my advice is t' take it away as soon 's possible."

"But I haven't!" cried Agatha. "It's just one of his crazy notions."

"Anyhow he's feelin' pretty ugly," Bert affirmed. His earnest face — sallow, like most druggists', from indoor work — revealed some anxiety. "Better keep the door locked." Then he added: "He's pretty near outa money — that's his trouble."

They contrived a simple signal: a stout cord, tied to the handle of a dust-pan on the sink, was rigged down through the kitchen floor of the flat to the prescription office of the drug-store, and there attached to the neck of a bottle. When Bert saw Herman coming, he was to jerk the dustpan to the floor. If Herman did succeed in getting upstairs, Agatha or one of the children would attract Bert's attention by a vigorous tug on the

bottle. Bert's new night-clerk, sworn to secrecy, was admitted as a co-conspirator.

The homely apparatus functioned admirably. Herman made three further raids in quick succession. Each time, Bert Donnelly was able to give Agatha ample time for making certain the street door was barred.

"He's getting wilder every day," reported the druggist. "Better have some signal to let the kids know when he's around."

The problem of the children had been growing more critical. Agatha, now experiencing an access of apprehension, had kept Avery and Winifred in the flat for several days. They were suffering from the confinement. On Bert's advice, Agatha hit upon another simple device: if their father was in the vicinity, she would hang a handkerchief on the window-shade cord in the parlour, and they were to remain away until the signal disappeared.

All the colluders were highly wrought up, by this time. Agatha had temporarily given over all hope of a reconciliation: Herman was in anything but a repentant mood. Her one thought was to keep him out of the flat at all costs. Later, no doubt, he would sing a more tractable tune. Bert Donnelly himself admitted he was getting "jumpy." The two children once more wore their scared, hunted look.

Herman's fifth attempt, equally abortive, presented two interesting phenomena. Bert Donnelly reported that the enemy seemed somewhat humbler. "He's dead-broke — wanted to borrow a dollar. Said he wanted t' see his little kiddies again." The pharma-

cist's eye became introspective, with a dash of scepticism. "But that might be just a blind."

Agatha herself was the observer of the second, more inscrutable, phenomenon. Her husband, having once more tried the door, detected Mrs. Angus Griffiths watching him from across the street. "She never misses a trick, that woman," Agatha groaned inwardly. Now Herman crossed the street, raising his hat with an impressive flourish; and incredible to relate, the unspeakable Mrs. Griffiths failed to exterminate him with one haughty look. Instead, she listened to him for several minutes, right out in the open of Beech Street, where all might see. Once or twice, Herman jerked his head in the direction of the flat; at frequent intervals, they raised their eyes to the lace curtains that shielded the quivering onlooker. With a furtive look that always presaged her most confidential communications, Mrs. Griffiths began talking to Herman. This continued a moment longer, then the erring husband again doffed his hat and made off.

A brief half hour later, when Winifred came home from dancing school and set about unlocking the street door, Herman stole swiftly from the Griffiths' back yard and pounced upon his daughter.

"Now we'll see who's boss here, missy!"

He wrenched the door open and disappeared within. Winifred ran screaming into the drug-store. The face of Mrs. Angus Griffiths came into view in her front window. Some occult telepathy brought three other women to favourable vantage points.

Wholly unaware of the catastrophe, Avery rounded

the Zimmerman house, enroute from a profitable afternoon at the gymnasium of the Beech Street Athletic Club. Before he emerged into the open, he satisfied himself that no handkerchief warned him from the parlour windows of the flat. Reassured, he ran across the street, and stopped uncertain before the open door.

Bert Donnelly bounced out of the side entrance of the drug-store.

"Don't go in there, Ave!" His sandy hair was dishevelled, his pale eyes were popping out with alarm and excitement.

Then Avery heard his mother scream.

He cried: "He's killing her," and raced up the stairs.

He found them in the kitchen. His father had backed his mother into a corner behind the stove. Agatha half crouched.

"Avery!" she screamed. "Go back!"

Herman had, all too clearly, made full use of the intervening half hour to insure the stage of alcoholic stimulation suitable for such an occasion. His thick lips, under those militaristic moustachios, were contorted into a silly grin. He waved a gleaming something vaguely about.

"C'mon now, ol' Big Nose," he boomed. "Where you got it hidden?"

The air was faintly redolent with the appetizing steam from the veal stew Agatha had recently set on the stove. Near by, on the sink, reposed that ludicrous, futile dustpan, its attached cord dangling limply through the knothole in the floor.

"I betcha got it in your stocking," Herman banttered. "Le's have a look." He moved uncertainly toward her.

Agatha emitted another of those piercing screams.

"Say, damn you, shut up!"

His open left hand pushed back Agatha's distasteful face. Her head struck the wall, and she fell.

"You leave her alone!" Something seemed to come loose inside Avery. He seized a broom — the only weapon he could lay his hands on — and struck at his father.

Even in his frenzy, Avery was conscious of astonishment when his father sank to the floor. And only a broom, too! Then he perceived that a policeman was in the room, brandishing his billy. Once more the club fell, this time on Herman's wrist. The revolver dropped to the floor.

Bert Donnelly was there, all at once, and the distorted countenance of Winifred. Several strangers, too.

"She's not hurt bad," announced one of these from behind the stove.

Handcuffs clicked over Herman's wrists. The clang of the patrol-wagon resounded from the street. The policeman prodded his bewildered victim with a thick-soled boot.

"Get a move on, my buck!"

Avery rushed to the window. Half a hundred people pressed expectantly about the covered wagon. Every front door in the block framed calicoed, aproned figures. Obliquely across Beech Street, the

form of Mrs. Angus Griffiths dominated the entire scene, darkly portentous.

Two policemen cleared a lane from the street door to the patrol-wagon. All eyes turned greedily toward the hallway. Now a hubbub of jeering shouts arose; the hatless, somehow ridiculous form of his father was passed through the crowd and catapulted into the recesses of the wagon.

The gong clanged, the spirited horses drew away. The crowd dispersed slowly, loathfully. Mrs. Griffiths' front door slammed. The serenity of the world laved over Beech Street's little flurry. Only the rhythmic moaning of Agatha persisted — hardly human, now and then running off into little nasal squeaks.

6

Avery was not so impressed with the augustness of Washington County Circuit Courtroom No. 2, as with its dingy, time-blackened, vault-like quality. The lofty ceiling's ornate circular mouldings, grimy with soot and an occasional cobweb, must have incited the housewifely instinct of the slothfullest of the would-be divorcées that seemed perennially to haunt the room. Even the high arched windows betrayed by their uncleanness the custody of the masculine.

Yet women certainly predominated here this bleak December forenoon — women whose infelicitous faces, ranging from the worn and sorrow-eroded to the brazen and slatternly, divulged the tragedy of incompetent husbandhood. Children abounded too, refusing, with that miraculous resiliency of youth, to be

quite crushed by the stern demeanour of the court-room. Yet the significant, albeit intangible, guest of the chancery chamber was the spirit of apprehension, infecting even these children. And of all the fifty odd persons assembled to bear tribute to the mute victory of legal Right over brute Might, none was so apprehensive as Agatha Zell.

She wore what might have been termed her virtuous-womanhood costume, the identical attire of that ineffectual pilgrimage to her husband's hotel room. Her insensitive, staring grey eyes peered uneasily toward the front of the enclosure. Herman was as yet absent. Fervently she prayed that fear might keep him away.

"There's my lawyer," she told Avery and Winifred.

The children stretched their necks to see this paragon of legal resource. Benjamin Harrison O'Dell permitted his consciously talented gaze to sweep over the human backwash, huddled together behind the railing. He was a young man of theatrical impressiveness, with a forceful nose and a brow, and overly long hair. He was quite undeniably on the make: his success in criminal and divorce cases was beginning to be noised abroad in the city.

"Better get Ben O'Dell," one of the pillars of Agatha's church had counselled.

Quite conscious of having attracted the attention of the court-room, Mr. O'Dell flung his important-looking brief-case on the counsel table and relapsed deep into an armchair, allowing his temperamental cranium to roll easily on the back of the chair. He was not above exchanging flippant jocularities with brother attorneys.

Then a little stir near a private door, and everybody stood up — even Mr. O'Dell. Avery caught a glimpse of an ancient, white-bearded, nervous negro croning some peculiar formula. All Avery could catch was its conclusion:

“— now in session.”

He became aware, after sitting down, that some dynamic force had energized the gloomy court-room; and presently he perceived that its radiating origin was a person he had not seen before; a man with combative eyes and upturned nostrils, mandarin moustaches, tousled unkempt hair, and a general air of defiant scepticism.

“Who's that man, mamma?” he whispered.

Her reply was reverential: “That's the judge.”

As each case was called, Agatha gave forth a half-suppressed gasp of relief. From time to time, women and children arose, walked through a little gateway in the railing, and stood mute before the bar of justice while their champions raised clamorous arguments. So this was oratory! Avery listened open-mouthed; he had entertained the inward conviction more than once lately that he had the makings of a great orator somewhere within himself. Always he kept one anticipatory eye on the figure of Benjamin Harrison O'Dell, still negligently relaxed, yet somehow significant of the power of great eloquence.

The judge gave heed with sardonic attentiveness. At regular intervals he leaned to one side and expectorated repletely. Once he crammed a handful of tobacco into his mouth; one slender strain of fine-cut

hung down from the corner of his mouth and at length merged with his drooping moustache. Into the height of the litigious eloquence he was wont to plunge. Then the court room hung on his decree: a few short words, snapped out hot as electric jump-sparks, and that particular controversy was at an end. He left no doubt who was master here.

Still no sign of the invidious Herman. Agatha's heart beat with half-fearful optimism.

"Zell versus Zell!"

At last! Mr. O'Dell was on his feet and magnificently beckoning to Agatha. Mother and children filed forward.

A corpulent little man was speaking. Beside Mr. O'Dell he seemed a roly-poly pigmy. His manner was inoffensive, his voice flute-like and adenoidal, his face mild and as if freshly barbered.

"This is the petition of Herman Zell, if the Court please," he lowed. The creamy accents went on and on. Avery suddenly got the idea: this impeccable gentleman, who resembled the Mad Hatter so astonishingly, was his father's lawyer. How humorous that the belligerent Herman should choose his physical antithesis to represent him! Avery listened with tremulous concern. His father, it appeared was wasting rapidly away because he couldn't see his darling children. The court's temporary injunction restrained him from molesting his wife or even seeing his family. He wanted this cross judge to order Agatha to turn Avery and Winifred over to him at least half the time, until the final outcome of the divorce proceedings.

"My client's cross-bill charges plaintiff with cruel and inhuman treatment of him," the lawyer said with great gravity, and Avery's eyes opened wide. "She wouldn't cook his meals for him, your Honour. She was insanely jealous without just cause. She treated him like a dog. And because of her unsatisfactory character, she ought not to have the custody of these little children." His arm shot out toward Avery and Winifred dramatically.

"Well, what have you got to say to all this?" the judge demanded of Mr. O'Dell with an air of having heard the same story too often.

Mr. O'Dell proved no disappointment. "A tissue of lies," he began, "with not a scintilla of truth in it!" This word, "scintilla," he employed again and again; it was evidently a favourite of his; he rolled it out grandly; and each time, he shook his head earnestly, so that the cowlick of heavy black hair on the front of his head fell down over his forehead with fine forensic effect.

"Where is the man who makes these dastardly charges against my client — a woman whose reputation in this community is as spotless as yonder snow?" he thundered, pointing to a near-by roof covered with what happened to be somewhat sooty snow. Avery remembered other pithy phrases: "A crime to take these helpless little tots" — that was his one grievance against their defender — "away from their God-given guardian and give them to this beast!"

Mr. O'Dell presented a counter-petition: his client wished alimony and solicitor's fees; Herman Zell was

an able-bodied man capable of earning large wages; he should be compelled to support his wife and family during the pendency of the case.

Throughout this moving recital, the impassioned advocate kept referring to the Mad Hatter as his "brother"—yet time after time he shook his fist most unfraternally in the bland, deprecating face of his opponent.

Mr. O'Dell seemed slightly taken aback when the Mad Hatter announced that his client was perfectly willing—"peffickly willing, if the Court please"—to pay plaintiff a reasonable alimony, provided he could have possession of the children part of the time.

"I resent and repudiate my brother's insinuations," he cooed, ruffling slightly.

Mr. O'Dell countered with so fierce a look that physical exchanges seemed imminent. The two attorneys had all too clearly become enemies for life.

"Ten dollars a week, twenty-f' 'ollars solicitor's fee," snapped the judge, surlily. "He can take children two days a week—Sat'day and Sunday, so's not interfere school."

Benjamin Harrison O'Dell displayed remarkable hardihood, at that.

"Why, this defendant was arrested and fined in Police Court, not a month ago, for assaulting my client." The ring of conviction was somehow lacking; few lawyers, though, would have dared go that far in questioning the announced decree of this awesome magistrate.

"Can't go into merits of case now." The judge

scowled. "Man's got right to see his own children — you know that's well's I do."

Mr. O'Dell passed a hand over his somewhat small mouth. "Not a scintilla —" he mumbled uncertainly.

"What's that?" fulminated the court, resembling an exacerbad walrus. "What's that?"

"I was just asking about costs," explained Mr. O'Dell in plaintive tones.

"No costs allowed." The majesty of the law spat.

Agatha raised a trembling hand and opened her mouth to speak. But her galliard checked her, as an older, wiser person checks a child. "Sh!" he held his fingers to his lips.

Then an astonishing thing happened.

"Rather had it on you there, Benny," said the Mad Hatter amicably, just outside the court-room door — quite as if nothing had happened.

Mr. O'Dell smiled weakly. "Can't win 'em all, you know. Got a match?"

And Avery had feared they would rend each other, limb from limb!

But to the overwrought Agatha, Mr. O'Dell explained that really it was a victory for her.

"He'll never pay that alimony," he predicted, his quondam confidence restored. "Until he does, I won't let him touch the kids." He winked with vast implications of slyness. "That's why I stuck in that petition for alimony. Don't you see — it absolutely stops him?"

But Agatha on the way home, was full of the dark-

est forebodings and the bitterest strictures against man-made justice.

"I didn't like the way Mr. O'Dell talked to that other lawyer out in the hall," she stated with growing suspicion. "What right's he got being so friendly? I'll just bet anything he's been bribed."

Monday morning, a letter arrived from the Mad Hatter — whose real name was Jenks — enclosing a check for ten dollars, one week's alimony, and stating that his client would call for the two children the following Saturday morning at eight o'clock and would expect to find them ready to go: "all in accordance with Judge Couman's order."

The four ensuing days marked the climax of agony. The very idea that modern civilization would sanction the bandying back and forth of immature children between irreconcilable parents seemed a ghastly, incredible joke. The slightest of investigations could have revealed Herman Zell's complete unfitness as a custodian; yet the inviolable majesty of the law had upheld that custody.

"What will he do with you while he has you?" Agatha tragically importuned, as if Avery and Winifred might know. "Where'll he take you? Who'll look after you?"

She swore hysterically she would never, never turn them over to Herman. "I'd rather see both of you dead!" But each passing day convinced her increasingly of her absolute helplessness. Slowly it came over her that she had been manœuvred into an impossible position. She was more inescapably trapped than

when she faced her husband's revolver in the corner behind the kitchen stove.

Small wonder she forgot her resolves to spare her children the shock of the calamity. She seemed to have lost her nerve entirely; what remained of her scanty reserves evaporated. She had no fight left in her; she was the condemned criminal awaiting the scaffold. She kept the two cowed children with her constantly, and upon their shrinking souls gave vent to her bitterest, most virulent desperation.

Even without this ordeal, the prospect was surely sufficiently cheerless for both of them. They stood in terror of their father. They regarded him as an ogre of frightfulness and iniquity. The thought of being alone with him consumed them with miserable concern. But in addition they must be closeted day after day with the despairing, stricken Agatha. Secreting and pouring out the poison in her heart doubtless proved a relief, an alleviation, to her; she had to find an audience for her prostrating anguish. But in the process she scorched the souls of the children irretrievably. They could never quite be whole again.

On Thursday, Mrs. Holmes appeared at the flat. Feebler than ever physically, a glow of determination blazed up in her dark sunken eyes. Her very presence sent a tiny current of hope pulsating in Avery.

"It's idiotic!" she clipped out. "Why have you been moping here all this time without letting me know? It's criminal! And these poor babies! Of course he shan't have them!"

She hustled them all off to the attorney's office.

"Now, Mr. O'Dell," she propounded, "let's stop wringing our hands long enough to do something." The mobile eyebrows of Agatha's champion rose in qualified protest, but the militant old lady paid no heed. "Mr. Zell doesn't want these children — wouldn't know what to do with 'em if he got them. They're simply the implements of revenge. *And* for forcing us to give him what he wants. Now what he wants is money; if we'll pay him his figure, he won't even contest the divorce."

Mr. O'Dell, under pressure, recalled that opposing counsel had made some remark about the possibility of a settlement.

"Call him up and see what they'll take," directed Mrs. Holmes.

Seemingly a trifle loath to be stirred into such direct action, the eloquent and wholly admirable Mr. O'Dell telephoned the Mad Hatter.

"Say, Jenks, d' you think we'll stand for any hold-up like that?" he thundered after a moment's colloquy.

"Wait a minute!" Avery's grandmother interrupted irreverently. "How much does he want?"

Benjamin Harrison O'Dell turned an outraged face. "A thousand dol —"

"Take it!" came the incisive command. "Of course, on condition he'll consent to giving up the children and having the injunction made permanent. . . . No, do as I say!"

"She'll pay it," Mr. O'Dell told Mr. Jenks with the chagrined expression of a restrained bulldog.

He pivoted again.

"He wants to know if it's cash."

"Cash," affirmed Mrs. Holmes grimly.

Thus prematurely and inconsiderately were cut off the sterling and splendidly constructive professional activities of Mr. O'Dell and the Mad Hatter.

Chapter Three: Obit Herman Zell

I

MRS. GRAM, the motherly old lady who acted as a sort of canonized stage manager at the monthly baptisms, knocked on his door like a summoning Fate.

The significant moment had arrived. His mother, who had helped him undress and put on the flowing robes of the ceremony, kissed him with unsuccessfully concealed agitation. She opened the door of the small enclosure, and Avery stepped forth.

Mrs. Gram took cognizance of him with sad benevolence.

"The little lamb," she said to Agatha.

No further word was spoken. Their conductress preceded them along a dark, overheated corridor, over a floor covered with rubber matting. His robes, the smallest the church possessed, were yet far too large for him; he felt himself an ungainly figure.

A right-angled turn brought them unexpectedly to the very brink of the baptistry. Through the scalloped archway, a considerable sector of the semicircular auditorium lay revealed; Avery instinctively stepped back before he remembered the concealment of the sombre shadows in which he stood. Hundreds of

eyes seemed focussed upon the baptistry. He took preoccupied note of a policeman standing near the glass doors of the side entranceway of the church. A second idler from the street duplicated the policeman's curious stare. But all these solemn eyeballs touched only the outer fringe of consciousness. Directly in front of and below him he beheld a baptism in progress. Since his turn came next, he watched the ceremony with acute concentration.

A little more than waist-deep in the waters of the baptistry stood the robed figures of the pastor, Reverend Whitlock, and a woman. Doctor Whitlock faced the congregation, his confident profile strongly illumined by the light from the auditorium; his left hand held the woman's, his right arm gripped the slack of her robe in the back. Avery did not recognize her. Her dark hair, loosely braided, fell down over the minister's hand. She looked middle-aged. Her attitude suggested a kind of huddled shrinking, supported by some inner fervour. Avery's heart filled with a sympathetic apprehension for her. Above the heads of the principals in the scene hung, suspended by wires, a snow-white dove, wings outstretched.

Doctor Whitlock's portentous accents ceased; he immersed the convert. Avery caught a glimpse of set features just before the water closed above her. It was over; he breathed a sign of deep relief. The woman emerged choking; she coughed violently; her wet hair drooped dispiritedly over her temples. The minister wiped off her face with his handkerchief and led her to the opposite side of the baptistry. Out

of the corner of his eye, Avery saw the policeman and the idler mutely sharing the humour of the episode, their hands discreetly over their mouths.

But now Doctor Whitlock was advancing toward him.

"Remember to hold your breath," whispered Mrs. Gram.

His chest expanded a little. He had no need to be warned; he could swim six strokes under water. He could be trusted not to make a scene.

The pastor led him to a point directly under the white dove, and began the ritual. Avery was surprised to find the water so warm. A delicious exaltation suffused him — a clear white light of spiritual virtue. He felt keenly the splendid thrill of conspicuousness; for the moment at least, he stood out from the mass, from the humdrum. He felt himself significant; he counted for something.

Doctor Whitlock's strong fingers took a fresh hold on the back of Avery's robe . . . "—and of the Son — (hold your breath!) — and of the Holy Ghost." The warm water laved his face for a disappointingly brief interval. He could have stayed under water ten times as long. He pictured the vast congregation deeply stirred by his exhibition of submarine prowess. That policeman out there must be laughing on the other side of his face, now.

He mounted the steps from the baptistry with reluctance. His mother seemed hardly to have comprehended the vast merit of his performance. She whispered:

"Hurry up, or you'll catch cold."

He snatched a final glance at the baptistry. Already his successor advanced slowly through the water under the minister's guidance. Already he sensed the reaction back to everyday unobtrusiveness. If he could only go through the ceremony once more!

Back in the small dressing compartment, Agatha helped him off with his dripping robes. These she gingerly carried away after a moment.

"I think I'll go on home with Winifred," she decided, "so's dinner'll be on time."

He felt a little deserted. In the compartments on either side, he could hear his fellow, new-made, church members in various stages of the dressing process; occasionally low voices murmured inarticulately. Yet the odour of sanctity still clung solacingly to him.

He pulled on a stocking. After all, he was different, set apart, from these others. He was younger, for one thing; certainly it was an extraordinary achievement to have been converted and baptized at the age of twelve years.

He recalled with distinct emotional pleasure the revival meetings that had stirred the whole city in March, two months ago. The coming of the world-famous evangelist, the Reverend Paul Cheever, had been heralded for almost a year in advance. Avery had heard his mother speak of the great man, with passing interest only; probably he would never have attended a meeting save for the divorce.

Agatha had taken her uncontested decree in January; they all felt an ineffable relief that the ordeal was

over; yet this self-same relief seemed swallowed up in the sombre melancholy that settled down over the household. Physical fear of Herman, uncertainty, dread, no longer hung over them — instead, an ever-present, bereaved sadness. The children presently ventured out once more, hiding as well as they could their conviction of disgrace. For their mother, the divorce marked the passing of romance for all time. No longer could she deceive herself with the belief that she was loved, desired. A bitter disillusion had her fast in its possession; she saw clearly at last what all others had seen from the beginning; what she herself had always fought tenaciously against seeing: that Herman Zell had never coveted her for her own self. The prospect of easy prosperity had wrought that flaming ardour in him — nothing else. How she must have revolted these days against the accident of her homeliness; with what mingled compunction and commiseration must she have regarded the blight of unattractiveness she had unwittingly passed on to her daughter. What fierce resolves must have burned within her to make amends to the unsuspecting Winifred.

Agatha hardened into middle age within a few weeks time. It was while she was in these depths of despair, frantically craving some solace, that the Reverend Cheever at last reached the city and began his fortnight of revivals.

Her attendance at the first meeting was largely fortuitous; she had dragged her listless body out to the gigantic, especially constructed, tabernacle, because she

felt she must go somewhere, to escape the tentacles of the physical restlessness that encompassed her.

Next morning, new life peered tentatively out of her opaquely grey eyes. Thereafter she sat at the noted evangelist's feet once, and often twice, each day. An almost fanatical religious zeal had overtaken her on the rebound from domestic tragedy.

Avery, still apprehensive-eyed, became her involuntary escort toward the end of the first week. He remembered vividly his first meeting: the masses of people at each of the score of entrance doorways; the wild, stifling rush when the doors were open; the screams of frightened women, the angry, shouted protests of men; the ushers imploring moderation. This was true excitement, Avery acknowledged. Once inside, he followed his mother over the sawdust-strewn earth to seats as far forward as possible. Agatha seemed suffused with anticipatory relish; expectant titillation illumined every face he could see.

The anecdotal eloquence of Paul Cheever made its deep impingement on him, as it did on those seven thousand other souls. He felt himself undulating between the consciousness of enormous sin and the delicious impulse to free himself by confession. Even more affecting for him were the simple songs rendered by Curt Lohmiller, the famous evangelist singer, to his own accompaniment on a diminutive reed organ. When Dr. Cheever asked the audience to bow its head in silent prayer, then called upon "those who have found Christ tonight" to raise their hands, Avery felt an almost irresistible summons to put up his own.

He observed that his mother was watching him closely with zealous eyes; and it came over him that she wanted him to be converted. She appeared disappointed when he hesitated.

But the following night he could no longer resist. When the eloquent evangelist began calling for the hands of penitent sinners, Avery's fingers twitched nervously. The emotional pull of the situation was terribly potent; somehow, too, he seemed to owe the penitential sign to his mother.

"There's one hand, away over to the left. God bless you, my brother!" reported the vibrantly stirring voice of Dr. Cheever. "There's another — and another. God bless you, my sister! Here are three more."

The tension suddenly became unbearable. Avery raised his hand one brief instant.

"One more hand over to the left. God bless you and keep you!"

He was shedding sweet, silent tears. A tremendous relief lightened his heart. Even the shame of the divorce seemed alleviated.

Agatha suggested that he join the church at once, that he might have the supporting strength of his fellow-Redeemed. Three weeks later he arose in prayer meeting and haltingly related his conversion. He joined four other applicants for church membership in the hallway outside the chapel, and breathlessly awaited the verdict. There were rumours of objections to him because of his age. Agatha had hinted, too, that one of the deacons, inexorably opposed to

divorce, had in days gone by stated that a child of divorced parents was no better than illegitimate.

Then that fateful door opened, and they told him his application had been approved. And today, the fructification! For the moment, as he sat in the small dressing compartment leisurely pulling on his clothing, he was knowing all the intense, half-poignant pleasure of the recent convert, instinct with noble intentions.

All of the other neophytes had taken leave by now. The janitor came into the room and evinced some slight impatience that Avery had not finished dressing. The recent convert, roused from his pleasant recollections, hurried through the final touches of his toilet.

He heard the children singing upstairs in the Sunday school room, as he passed through the wide hallway between the chapel and the church auditorium. He glanced through the glass doors, his eyes instinctively travelling from the rows of deserted pews to the baptistry, dark and hollow looking. Even the white dove had been removed.

He started slowly homeward, still deeply meditative. In a way, his baptism seemed to solemnize a release, a redemption, from all the shame, from all the corrosive ignominy, of being the son of Herman Zell. His father's name was never mentioned nowadays; they all pretended he had never existed; and yet somehow his evil spirit brooded over the household incessantly.

Just before he reached Beech Street, a man stepped out of the alley in front of him, and stood waiting in a posture of timid uncertainty. Not until he was close enough to see the man's eyes did Avery realize,

with a shock, that he had come upon his father. Herman presented a crestfallen, unkempt figure. His face was flabby with dissipation; his crapulent eyes were inflamed and watery; his chin untidy with several days' growth of black beard. Those gladiatorial moustache-ends sagged grossly. His brown derby, once so dashing, drooped battered and dusty over the matted hair that escaped from under its rim. He still wore his winter suit of conspicuous blue plaid; but now it looked forlorn with wrinkles, grease spots; and the trousers, always so impeccably pressed, bulged grievously at the knees.

Avery stopped. The street was deserted.

"My darling boy!" croaked this down-at-the-heel, sadly frayed wreck of former glory. "Don't be 'fraid of me — I wouldn't touch a hair of your head."

But his son's manner suggested, not alarm, but a loathing disdain.

"What is it you want?" he asked in tones of conscious virtue. His father was a wicked sinner, worthy of the scorn of all Christians.

"I got t' talk to you a minute, Avery. I don't dare go near the house," pleaded Herman. He wanted to see his darling wife and children once more; he wanted to beg their forgiveness, he said — to find out if they wouldn't take him back. He had learned his lesson.

Avery listened to his parent's piteous appeal with the aloof, chaste politeness of the securely virtuous. Inwardly he was slightly uncomfortable.

"Please — oh, please — tell her, go on. I'll wait here till you come back."

The new convert hesitated. All this talk seemed vaguely familiar to him. He resented being made a catspaw all over again. Would his father and mother never cease using him as a hapless intercessor?

"You've been a very bad man," he said with conviction. Yet he wanted to show Christian forbearance.

Herman glared at his virtuous son with a flicker of his old temper. Then quite unexpectedly, he burst into tears. Avery stood petrified. He had never seen a man cry before. There was something terribly tumultuous about those choking sobs; something that wrenched his heart. His consciously holy mien vanished. He was instantly remorseful.

"Don't cry, papa," he begged. "I'll go right away."

But Agatha was vehemently indignant that he had even spoken to his father.

"You act as if you thought everything he's done was perfectly all right."

"But mamma — he cried! You ought to 've heard him. He's so sorry. The Bible says —"

"Sorry!" his mother sneered. "He's finished spending your grandmother's money — at least what he got after he'd divided with his lawyer. That's all! He's dead broke. Sorry! D'you think a man can wrong a good woman the way he has me, and then come back and do a little crying and start all over again? I got a notion to call the police!"

Under this onslaught, Avery forbore — though, as the May afternoon wore away, he couldn't help pic-

turing the pathetic, dissolute figure of his once magnificent father, waiting wistfully, hopefully, among the tin cans and refuse heaps in the alley.

2

Avery was sixteen years old, and the month of January, 1900, was three-quarters gone, before they had news of Herman Zell again.

To be sure, there was that strange and highly incredible rumour in 1898. One of the neighbours brought Agatha a newspaper one day, and showed her a casualty list, whence it appeared that a certain Herman Zell had been wounded in action in Cuba. No confirmation of any kind ever reached Agatha; but later on, in the fall of the year, the same neighbour proffered a second obscure item, to the effect that Herman Zell, with several others, had been awarded a medal for conspicuous bravery at San Juan.

"It couldn't be him," Agatha decided. "He's dissipated too much to ever be a soldier. He's too old and too fat."

Still later, this same indefatigable informant secured a description of the hero from a friend of hers who had a cousin in the Rough Riders; and from this meagre information, it seemed almost certain that the Herman Zell of the battlefield was none other than the Herman Zell of Beech Street.

And yet the thing remained vague, a myth, not real. It was all quite too preposterous. Certainly Agatha was not softened. She remained rigid with her sense of grievance. For if she relented ever so

slightly in her hard unforgivingness, where was morality — and where the Christian justification for hatred? No, those old deep wounds must never be torn open. Meanwhile she lived for the consolation of her religion and the future of her children.

For her daughter, especially, she was experiencing the highest solicitude. Avery could take care of himself; he was by way of being a normal youth, save for the timidities and concealments of their family disgrace. And he, who being a boy had no need of beauty, was gifted with a prepossessing regularity of feature and straightness of nose; while the luckless Winifred, to whom physical attractiveness would count for so increasingly much, grew homelier each day. Her ardent Holmes nose seemed larger than ever; in cold weather, or when she wept, it took on a pinkish lucency. Orthodontia, highly painful and expensive, had quite failed to confine her protruding upper teeth. Her short upper lip had the embarrassing habit of sticking to her front teeth whenever she became excited.

Avery was already in his third year of high school; but Winifred had not fared well in her studies. She had now practically dropped out of school, and was taking private lessons in aesthetic dancing and drawing, for which she professed warm enthusiasm. Undeniably, she possessed a vivid colourful imagination, and on occasions, a kind of frantic fearlessness. Agatha felt she had a daughter of high talent. She spent sleepless nights, turned gradually grey — over the problem of Winifred's future happiness: how could she be rescued from the blighting handicap of unlove-

liness that would soon begin to force itself on her consciousness? Agatha protested fiercely to herself that Winifred must somehow be spared the infelicity that had darkened her own life.

Thus she heaped continuous praise upon Winifred's every act. Winifred's dancing was marvellous. Winifred's most amateurish sketches were received with vociferous acclamation. Winifred's dresses must be the prettiest in the neighbourhood. Whenever a children's play was given, Winifred must play the part of the Fairy, or the Good Angel with straw-coloured curls. Small wonder that the ugly duckling was becoming an insufferable, spoiled prig, who must always have her own way on pain of angry, disfiguring tears.

Late one Friday afternoon in January, 1900, Avery left the high school debating society — before which he had just upheld a persuasive negative on the question: "Was Daniel Webster a greater American than Henry Clay?" — and began walking briskly toward the apartment house whither Agatha had moved the family, shortly after the long-expected death of her mother, the preceding summer. They were in easier circumstances now; Agatha derived a fairly adequate income from her father's estate, and she had the additional privilege of drawing on the principal to the extent of a thousand dollars a year, whenever she could demonstrate her necessity to the trust company that was serving as executor.

Along in his fifteenth year, Avery had begun to worry a great deal about his physical stature. His two neighbourhood chums, Harold Zimmerman and Aubrey

Milhollin, approximately of his age, had matured early; they were six inches taller than he. He commenced to imagine that there must be something wrong with him. Would his voice never change? All at once puberty overtook him. During the past twelve months, he had grown a foot, into a tall, "skinny" young man, with a deep voice that frequently broke under pressure. Agatha characteristically fought against recognizing the change. They had several warm passages on the subject of clothing. Avery pointed out with unanswerable logic the necessity of long trousers; but not until he had finally locked himself in his room and issued a vehement ukase that he would never be seen on the street again in knickerbockers, did she yield. With long trousers, he could begin to assume his rightful place in manly affairs. An unwritten code forbade the admission of short-panted boys into the high school debating society, for example; but now Avery made application and secured prompt admission.

Ahead of him on the snow-patched street this afternoon he discerned the figure of a girl, scarlet-jacketed, a few text books under her arm. The spectacle of that flaming coat produced a sudden noisy obstruction in his breathing apparatus. He glanced around nervously. Well he knew this crimson garment. Many a time had he already worshipped it. Miss Brownlee — he hardly presumed to think of her as Susette Brownlee — the possessor of the jacket, prostrated him low with humble, timorous adoration. In the inmost sanctuary of his heart he called her: Affinity Number One. There were minor, more approachable di-

vinities in his Heaven, but none so celestial, none so unattainable. He told himself he loved her.

He hurried forward until he was only a rod or two behind her. Did he dare accost her, walk with her? He hesitated wretchedly — let the distance grow between them until he could decide. He scowled with self-disgust. If only he could command that easy quality with which he had seen some of the other boys approach her. The old emotion of secret shamefulness withered his heart; he could have cried with the sense of mortification over that vagrant father of his. It sometimes seemed to him everybody in high school knew of the divorce. He had no self-assurance. Self-abasement flowed through his veins. He deemed every other student his social superior. It was difficult to refrain from the habit of wriggling ingratiation. In the eyes of Miss Brownlee, especially. She lived in a big house, on a much better street than he; she belonged to a family of some position; he had found out, by secret prying, that her father was a well known judge. Toward her he felt as a leprous pauper in the presence of a princess.

His secret passion urged him toward her once more. She had been very pleasant to him in their few memorable encounters. Why shouldn't he talk to her, and walk with her? But what if she rebuffed him, even slightly! His pride, sensitized by long brooding over the family's vicissitudes, winced in fancied hurt.

His corner was near at hand. He forced himself onward in a final spurt. No, he could not. It was no use. It would never be any use.

He reached the apartment house, tormented with self-loathing. Now that the episode was past, he cursed himself for his own cowardice. He visualized himself, conversing epigrammatically, laughingly, with the scarlet jacket.

He wished his father were dead.

His heart-sick detestation of himself found vent in kicking the outer door of the building, and again, the entrance door of his mother's flat on the second floor. Inside, he flung his black felt hat on a chair in the hallway, and turned toward the front windows.

"Mother, why do we have to live in a bum neighbourhood like this, anyhow?"

Agatha sat motionless in the stationary rocker; Winifred lingered tearfully at her side. His mother held some papers in her lap, and he knew from her demeanour that something of first-rate importance had befallen.

He took the telegram she silently handed him, and read:

NEW YORK, N. Y.

MR. ZELL DIED ST. NICHOLAS HOSPITAL THIS MORNING.
DID YOU RECEIVE MY LETTER? WIRE DISPOSITION DESIRED.

EMILY HAAS.

He was aware of surprise, but no great sorrow.

"Here is the letter," his mother said. "It came three days ago."

It was written in a small, meticulous, vertical handwriting, and signed: "Emily Haas, Nurse." Its brief content was that Herman Zell was dying of cirrhosis of

the liver in a free bed at the St. Nicholas Hospital; that he had asked her to write to his wife and beg her forgiveness; that he wanted to see his wife and children before he died.

Avery turned a shocked face toward his mother. The picture of his father dying, forlornly alone and destitute in a charity ward, penetrated to his heart much more poignantly than the first news of his death.

"You got this three days ago?"

Agatha answered the accusation in his tone and look. "I didn't know what to do. I thought it might be some trick. Oh, how I've prayed for guidance! This morning — after you'd gone — I decided we'd go. The trunk's all packed. Then the telegram came."

What he remembered most vividly in later years were the gentleness of his mother's voice and the unusual expressiveness of her eyes. He liked to remember the look on her face. It always set him speculating whether she had in the end really understood and forgiven his father: understood him as a weak, vain, sentimental, boisterous soul, who wanted to have "swell" clothes and plenty of money, to be held irresistible by women and a "card" by men, and who could so easily have been managed by a cleverer woman; forgiven him because she understood him, and because it is difficult to hate a dead man.

It never seemed incredible to Avery that Herman Zell, stripped of his vanity, physically crucified at the end, really meant that last appeal for forgiveness, genuinely experienced some access of affection for his chil-

dren and for his wife. In later life, Avery had the feeling that Agatha at no time was completely free from the spell of Herman's physical impressiveness, his bovine, Victorian pulchritude, his somewhat vealy, handsome face — never quite forgot her virginal thrill of surrender-victory with him.

Thus some small remnant of affection survives the bitter acrimonious blindness of nearly every domestic tragedy. It is difficult for humans to live intimately together without discovering appealing aspirations and emotions, lovable weaknesses and habits. After legal surgery and time have healed over insurmountable irritations, there must come, involuntarily, remembered moments of communion that leave one vaguely remorseful, acutely wistful.

II. Marriage



Chapter One: At Twenty-Three

I

THE engraved card irreverently tossed on his desk by an office boy bore the name:

MR. SAUL SHERBONDY.

Avery looked up impatiently. Already it was a quarter before five, and he had planned to cast aside his heavy responsibilities as Fourth Assistant Trust Officer of the Fidelity Trust Company punctually at five. Through the several glass partitions that intervened between him and the outer waiting room, he discerned a short, full-faced person staring in his direction. Avery was already receiving frequent visits from life insurance agents, and an occasional hopeful bond salesman; he now felt a certain intuition that his present caller wanted to sell him something. He decided to go to the waiting room and there make short work of Mr. Sherbondy.

Then he noticed in the lower left hand corner of the card the announcement, in smaller letters:

PRESIDENT AND GENERAL MANAGER,
MILADY PETTICOAT COMPANY.

"Ask him to come in," he directed the office boy.

A moment later, Mr. Saul Sherbondy was shaking hands with every evidence of radiant pleasure. His

grey eyes, so small that the whites were rarely visible, twinkled and beamed from his extremely ruddy skin. His wide smile disclosed large, translucent front teeth, flecked with spots of opaque white and an occasional small gold filling. He was not many years older than Avery, yet already there were many grey patches in the curly hair that fringed his broad face, far back from the forehead and temples.

"You're a very good friend of Aubrey Milhollin, I understand," he initiated.

Avery perceived he was dealing with a personage of distinction. Behind his caller's ingratiating air of camaraderie, he could detect the note of self-assurance, of complete faith in himself.

The stranger was still standing on his wide-apart, self-confident feet, Avery suddenly realized.

"Sit down."

"Thanks," acceded Mr. Sherbondy. "Smoke?"

"Not cigars — they're bad for my singing. Yes, I'm a friend of Aubrey's."

"Well . . . You knew he was going to New York a week from Monday."

Avery's naïve features betrayed surprise.

"Not for good?"

"Um-huh. Clever boy — sure to make good."

"I haven't seen much of Aubrey since we graduated from college," Avery explained. He was wondering whether Mr. Sherbondy was a Jew. The thick curving lips were Semitic, but the long shrewd nose looked Scotch. The rosy blondness decided the query in the negative.

"Decided all at once he was going down on Broadway and become the Great American Playwright," informed the petticoat manufacturer. "Queer ambition — but, as I say, he's clever. And a damn nice boy, too."

"Yes." The Fourth Assistant Trust Officer remembered he had his professional position to maintain. His monosyllable was dignity itself.

Mr. Sherbondy knocked his cigar ash off upon the green carpet, instead of into the waiting brass cuspidor. He was apparently not to be overawed by the trust company atmosphere.

"But the point is this. It struck me a few of Aubrey's best friends ought to give him a regular send-off. Something he'll remember, you know. How does that strike you — say, a week from Saturday night?"

"All for it," Avery promptly acquiesced. "Wait a minute — by George! That's my choir rehearsal night."

"No!" said Sherbondy, a shade of disappointment in his voice. "Say, that's too bad. Saturday night's the best bet for a party — you know that!"

For a moment Avery remained speculatively silent.

"Can't you fix it?" pleaded the organizer of the feast. "What is it — some church quartet?"

"No — just a chorus choir I sing in. Yes, I will — I'll simply cut it." Avery noticed that it was nearly five o'clock. "Sorry — I've got to be on my way — was just going when you came."

Sherbondy stood up. "Sure. Don't let me keep you."

"Wait a minute and I'll walk downstairs with you."

At the door of the building, Saul Sherbondy extended his hand. "I'll fix everything, and 'phone you when and where."

Avery turned away from this interesting and energetic new acquaintance, purchased two "sport extras," and embarked on the long and disagreeable street-car ride that lay ahead of him. Winifred was entertaining her Five Hundred Club that night; and his mother had asked him to bring his second cousin, Ruby McPhee, to the apartment for dinner, and inferentially, to take her home after the party. Just why an able-bodied girl like Ruby needed an escort for an afternoon street car ride, Avery could not understand. The card party was enough of a bore, he felt. He had no enthusiasm for the members of the Five Hundred Club. They were all second-raters. But even a college graduate, with lofty social hopes, must at intervals succumb to the disadvantages of having an inelegant family.

Ruby McPhee was a nice enough sort of girl — not stunning at all, of course, but presentable. Her talent as an elocutionist, it seemed, had survived childhood; she had come to the city two years ago to take a course in a local school of dramatic expression. This was to be her last year. He condemned her as a "high-brow"; and yet secretly, he realized a certain respectful awe of her. She never permitted herself to show the faintest deference for Avery's scholastic degrees; in fact, he was always conscious of an underlying attitude of superciliousness toward him. This he resented, yet it kept him from holding her cheaply. He

was a little self-conscious with her — for ever stimulating himself to show her that her disapproval was unjustified.

It seemed to him his mother was constantly including Ruby in the family's unpretentious social activities, that he was eternally being pressed into service as a convenient attendant. And Ruby, of course, had to choose rooms on the south side of town, quite five miles away from the Zell apartment.

It was half-past five when he rang the door bell of her rooming house. Fully ten minutes later, she came into the diminutive parlour, with an air of self-importance that exasperated, yet silenced, his impatience at her delay.

"Here I am at last," she announced.

Her voice had a dulcet, ultra-modulated quality, designed to suggest the ultimate in feminine refinement.

"I'm afraid we'll be late." Avery bit his lips.

She surveyed him with that faint intimation of his lack of culture.

"Oh, that would be too bad." She pulled on her gloves and readjusted a veil. "Perhaps we should be starting."

Ruby's principal claim upon attractiveness was her complexion: her skin was of an extreme fineness of texture; her cheeks were, if anything, too colourful. After a brisk walk in cold weather, her face fairly flamed. Her eyes and mouth were unexceptionable; but her nose was undoubtedly imperfect. It was very small and curved slightly upward at the end. As a

symbol of her mental distinctiveness, she wore nose-glasses — a stigma Avery could never quite forgive in any girl.

Dinner was wholly unexciting. But the fortnightly meeting of the Northwestern Five Hundred Club furnished the climax of boredom for Avery. A dozen young men and women crowded into the little apartment. One solemn, pale-faced youth — a new member — appeared in a "dress-suit," and spent the balance of the evening in a torture of self-consciousness. Avery loathed cards. He loathed what he termed "ordinary people." He sat down grimly at one of the tables and began the evening's sport.

Yet slowly even he became infected with the virus of excitement. He found his saturnine comments greeted with explosive giggles from the girls at his table. What man can resist the lure of being considered witty, of evocating shrill laughter from young women?

"Isn't Mr. Zell the most sarcastic thing?" he heard a blue-clad blond girl saying. His comments grew increasingly mordant. He became the humorous grouch.

As he "progressed" from table to table, however, he presently sensed rivalry. One of his partners asked him if he didn't think Alfred Lucius said the "killingest things." In the very next shifting of couples, he encountered this man Lucius — a chubby-faced, roly-poly creature, with a wide-nostrilled nose that tilted up so abruptly it had the effect of suspending his long upper lip.

"My Gawd!" promptly sallied Lucius, in an affected feminine falsetto. "When do we eat?"

This did not impress Avery as high-grade humour, yet the two young ladies at the table burst into hysterical cries of mirth.

"*You* don't look to me as if you needed food," he countered with what seemed to him crushing satire.

But somehow the laughter was imperceptible. It dawned on Avery that he was being outclassed. After a bit no one seemed to listen to his shafts of humour. The girls, not only at his particular table, but all about, hung on Lucius' every golden word. They would begin shrieking at his smallest grimace. And Avery hated him intensely. As his rival's star rose higher and higher, his own sank dismally and finally expired. He grew silent and morose. After all, what difference did it make whether or no these second-raters thought Lucius funny?

At last — God be praised! — the tourney came to an end. Then ensued a clamorous computing of scores — the babel reached a crest of laughter when it developed that Lucius' card had been punched fewer times than anybody else's — and the awarding of prizes: for the successful girl, a bedizened box containing three small bottles of perfume; for the man, a necktie of gorgeous green silk enlivened with bright red horseshoes. The booby prize, a huge candy cane, went to Lucius, who forthwith stuffed the end of it into his large soft mouth.

Suddenly the comedian's eyes protruded dramati-

cally, and he withdrew the candy cane from his mouth with the sound of a suddenly unpopped cork.

"Ye Gods!" he piped. "Food!" He burst into tears.

Agatha Zell and Winifred had appeared in the hallway, bearing large trays of sandwiches and coffee.

Lucius educed enormous comic effects by fetching a gingham apron from the kitchen and assisting with the refreshments.

"Buttling's my middle name," he assured Mrs. Zell, who had the very bad taste to laugh hysterically at him. There was not the least doubting he was the life of the party. Some of the men looked a little sour, with the feeling, presumably, that their own waggish abilities had not been fully appreciated. Avery was as rude as possible. He yawned whenever the buffoon came near him.

Lucius was finally persuaded to desist from his efforts as waiter. Food was fairly heaped upon him, and he ate prodigiously. Ever and anon, he would pause a moment and with elaborate conspicuousness, loosen his belt another notch,—a proceeding that appealed to the Five Hundred Club as the apogee of drollery. Some of the girls laughed till tears rolled down their cheeks.

"There!" sighed Lucius, surrendering his third plate of Neapolitan ice cream. "I feel as well as if I'd had a hearty meal."

Mrs. Zell pressed Ruby McPhee to recite something.

"Oh, no, I can't really," protested Ruby.

The alternate coaxings and disclaimers, customarily

considered good breeding on such occasions, occupied a full five minutes. With extreme reluctance, Ruby finally advanced to one end of the parlour, brushed her lips with a handkerchief, deposited it on the window-seat, and faced her critical audience with a sudden smile of professional artlessness.

"Little Miss Crocus."

All at once it came back to Avery: the scene in his grandfather's sitting room, fourteen years ago; his cousin's recitation about the "sweet red rose"; his own painful disgrace.

Ruby blinked her eyes, suppressed a yawn, and compressed her lips into an expression of juvenile impatience.

Time folks was gettin' up — they're so slow.

I've been awake here hours ago.

Reckon I'll peep out. Who's afraid?

That dark ain't nothin' only shade.

Been here long enough in my bed;

Guess I'll push blanket off my head.

Ruby now executed a gesture of release, and stared up at the low parlour ceiling with childish naïveté. Her voice became even more infant-like:

My stars! What a world! Ain't it white?

I b'lieve the clouds fell down in the night.

I smell something. My, that's good!

Must be arbutus, out in the wood.

Incredulity in tone and gesture:

If there ain't Snow Drop! Seems to me

She'd better stay where she ought to be.

Wonder what brought her out so soon.
S'pose *she* thought 'twas *afternoon*!

Then extreme roguishness:

She'll get her nose nipped — serve her right!
Small children like her must keep out of sight.

Ruby's voice became apprehensive; she shivered and huddled her shoulders together.

Wind needn't blow so — makes such a din.
Good gracious! Guess *I'd* better go in.
Where's my blanket gone? Cold hurts so!
Poor little crocus is freezin' up — Oh!

Finally mock tragedy:

B'lieve I'm an orphan, goin' to die —
And b-be an angel up in the sky.

Considerable applause and laughter rewarded Ruby's effort. A pleased murmur arose. "How perfectly darling!" exclaimed one girl near Avery. He happened to be looking at Winifred for the moment, and he noted with mild surprise that her expression did not reflect the general enthusiasm.

"She doesn't like Ruby," some obscure instinct whispered to him. Winifred always looked homeliest, he thought, when she was dressed up. Her absurdly "loud" lavender gown only served to accentuate that unbelievable nose, those protruding incisors.

The girl in blue was speaking:

"I hear Mr. Zell sings."

Now Avery was perfectly clear in his own mind

that he did not want to sing — did not intend to sing — for this “bunch of scrubs.” And still, in the midst of his stout refusals, that ever-present, sneaking, craving of his to be conspicuous, to be somehow noteworthy, was undermining his resistance. He was weak enough presently to let his mother lure him to the piano. He knew, of course, that Agatha’s chief interest in the affair lay in creating an opportunity for Winifred to shine as accompanist. His mother was always pushing her unattractive daughter forward, always lauding her least effort to the skies — just as she had always done.

He resented the flourish with which Winifred elevated the piano stool.

“Oh, I s’pose, the ‘Armorer’s Song,’ ” he answered her look of inquiry.

With elaborate commotion she took the score of “Robin Hood” from the top of the piano, and found the page where began this favourite war-horse of all young bassos.

Avery heard subdued conversation and turned haughtily in its direction. The blonde in blue was talking to the melancholiac in evening dress. She felt the stern reproof and subsided guiltily. Near her, Avery had a fleeting glimpse of the temporarily impassive face of Alfred Lucius.

The opening phrases of the song went resonantly well. He discovered a considerable amount of saliva in the back of his throat, and an involuntary deglutition almost brought him to grief in the midst of the words:

Let wars rage still,
While I work with a will —;

but just before the phrase, "The sword is a weapon —," he had an instant's rest, and managed to swallow hastily.

His voice issued increasingly clear, and he began to put his soul into it. But infelicitously, just as he was commencing what he called the chorus, he became aware of a definite distraction of attention. Out of the corner of his eye he perceived the nearest of his auditors grinning out into the back parlour. He swung around; his angry eyes caught the Court Jester in an exceedingly silly attitude of falling asleep. Every one in the room was watching him; the girl in blue seemed agonized with restrained giggling.

Avery nearly choked. He wanted to throw the book of music full in that fat, inept visage. The Five Hundred Club instantly sensed the crisis. Mirth faded from its countenance; its attention turned solicitously toward the vocalist. The eyes of Lucius opened insolently.

Wrath made Avery's voice tremble as he pursued his way toward the song's end. He ought never to have attempted that optional, low B-natural. He was no basso profundo. His teacher called him a basso cantante. At his luckiest, his low B was unimpressive. Yet just because he could at times take this sepulchral tone, and because it was so satisfying an achievement when properly vocalized, he took the plunge:

“ — Thaht —

I.”

. is .

His lower jaw dropped amazingly; his Adam's apple shrank from view — but only the merest trickling of sound emerged from his dilated mouth. His voice wobbled — broke.

His face flushed. He pretended excessive concern in returning the score to the top of the piano. He dared not look around. He thought he heard a suppressed giggle.

“ My Gawd! ” came Lucius' affected falsetto as he smoothed back his hair with moistened forefinger. “ My Gawd — I wish I was talented! ”

That — as the Five Hundred Club expressed it — brought down the house.

“ What do I think of them? ” growled the basso cantante in response to Ruby McPhee's question, as they bumped along in the street-car toward her destination. “ Personally — well, I think they're a bunch of rough-necks.”

She rejoined shortly:

“ I suppose really it's a mistake for any artist to try to do anything worth while before such people.”

He felt warmed by this new community of viewpoint. He said to himself: “ This is a sensible girl.”

"And that unspeakable Lucius person," Ruby went on. "He's positively vulgar. No culture at all."

Culture — that was the word. Reassurance flowed through his veins deliciously. It seemed to him Ruby and he stood out alone in a decadent world, the sole remaining trustees of Culture. All he needed for complete rehabilitation was his cousin's afterthought:

"Your voice has lovely quality, I think. What are you doing with it?"

That marvellous complexion of hers — her reddened cheeks especially, shaded slightly by her wide-brimmed picture hat, and in vivid contrast to the white fox neck-piece she wore — had never looked so freshly beautiful before. He voted her almost pretty — was near to condoning those blemishing nose-glasses of hers. Best of all, she had brains. She appreciated him.

2

"Come on in," radiated Mr. Saul Sherbondy, from the barroom door of the Hotel Constantinople. "You're the last man here."

Avery was not quite at ease. He was not an habitué of the Constantinople's grandeurs. He had hesitated a moment at the threshold of that famous bar, before the omniscient Sherbondy had caught sight of him from the opposite side of the room.

"Sorry to be late," he apologized. He did not explain that he had been delayed by a bitter wrangle with his mother over the evening's festivities. He had been compelled to borrow five dollars from her, and of course she had cross-questioned him; the more he

attempted to reassure her, the higher rose her motherly apprehension. She had ended up by imploring him not to go; in order to soothe her and secure the needed financial reinforcement, he had promised to be home by eleven o'clock.

"That's aw-right, my boy," said the ruddy master of ceremonies. "Come on over and meet the bunch. Just getting a little start before the real show begins."

In one of the upholstered recesses that indented the walls of the big room, Avery espied the egg-shaped head of Aubrey Milhollin. The potentially Great American Playwright set down his cocktail glass and beckoned vehemently.

Next to Milhollin sat a thin-faced, sallow individual named Franklyn Squires, a fellow newspaper man of Aubrey's, whom Avery knew slightly and with whom he now shook hands enthusiastically.

"Meet Mr. Lucius," Sherbondy introduced.

Avery veered toward the third occupant of the stall, and slowly turned to stone.

"Sure, I know Zell," certified the Five Hundred Club's favourite comedian.

A wan smile overspread Avery's features as he sat down and permitted Saul Sherbondy to order a Bronx cocktail for him. The cursèd ill luck of the situation paralysed him. To think that this brightly promising evening, to which he had looked forward all week, should lie completely spoiled at the very outset.

"Cheer up, Zelly, old kidney!" rallied the guest of honour. "This is no inquest, you know."

He was grateful for the intrusion of the waiter

with his drink. Half the cocktail disappeared into his mouth.

"Wait till I've caught up with you fellows," he pleaded, with the air of a man who depends largely upon his liquor — whereas it must be confessed he viewed strong drink with some alarm. Beer he knew what he could do with, but these mixtures —

Sherbondy raised an imperious hand. "This is positively the last drink, my friends, before dinner. Afterwards — well, we've got the whole night ahead of us."

At the café entrance, a head-captain bowed low.

"This way, Mr. Sherbondy."

Avery felt a renewed glow of comfortable admiration for the eupeptic arranger of the party. Sherbondy, it was clearly perceptible, was a man of importance. Merely being seen with him threw a reflected aura of prestige over his followers.

"I hope you'll approve of these ring-side seats, gentlemen," he said, when the captain paused at a table, bearing a card with the words, "Reserved," just on the edge of a small cleared space in front of the orchestral platform.

Perhaps the evening held something in store for him after all, Avery concluded. He was careful not to sit next to the execrable Lucius, who thus far had maintained an abnormal silence.

Men and women in their vicinity cast sidelong glances toward them, especially toward their leader, who still conversed easily with the lingering head-captain.

"Got any decent new acts, Albert?" Avery's impressed ears heard Sherbondy demand.

Albert raised his oriental eyebrows, made an outward gesture of deprecation with his fore-arms.

"Is a new dancer," he imparted, "and — have you heard the Telephone Song?"

Sherbondy shook his head.

"Well —" and Albert shrugged his shoulders, "it gets the crowd. Personally, I can't see it."

This same atmosphere of distinction hovered ever more gratefully over the favoured quintette. Sherbondy carried an air of gracious boredom, and Aubrey and Franklyn Squires, being newspaper men, permitted no pleased ingenuousness to shake their settled air of complete and cynical disillusion. The life of the Five Hundred party remained singularly impassive. But to Avery, the occasion possessed all the ecstatic, explosive effect of novelty. This was real life, he told himself — all these girls, each with her individual, subtly different appeal, yet every one of them carrying the titillating suggestion of adventure, of possible wickedness; these men, with their air of masterful knowledge of the world; this strident, rhythmical music, and the glimpses into the adjacent dance room, full of gyrating, darting couples. Still, even the neophyte in him was not so crass, so jejune, that he could possibly have committed the fatal error of disclosing his naïve excitement. He passed derogatory comment, accordingly, upon the "Quartette from Rigoletto":

"That contralto ought to do something for her girlish figure."

"Sh!" whispered Squires, with solemn protest. "Perhaps she is a mother."

The others similarly derided the new dancer — though Avery secretly found her thrilling. He was in a state of extreme internal stimulation. A conviction that he was playing up to his part suffused him satisfyingly. His chief anxiety seemed without foundation: he was apparently carrying his alcohol as well as the next man. He went so far as to banter Alfred Lucius for being a "dead one."

The orchestra set forth on a new number, and a man and a girl appeared in front of the platform, on opposite sides of the open space. Each held a telephone. The audience became abruptly attentive; applause prefaced the song. This pair were indubitably the much-vaunted newcomers. Even Saul Sherbondy looked around.

The beholders absorbed the idea with wonderful quickness: the man and the girl were telephoning each other. First he would sing a line, then she would reply. The chorus ended, in unison:

Well, *hel-lo!* How *are* you?
How are you? Good-bye.

The song drew an ovation. The performers sang it again and again. Gradually it dawned on Avery that the song was not really so remarkable — nor the male singer. He found himself staring at the girl. Sherbondy was doing likewise. She was scarcely good-looking, quite plainly dressed. Her hair and eyes were dark, her face somewhat thin. Her uniqueness lay in

her strange reserve: she did not fling herself upon her audience and shriek for applause, as the dancer did, and some of the other singers. Her manner was hardly civil. She appeared aloof, disdainful. And something indefinable about her personality spread a peculiar charm over the two hundred pleasure-seekers in the café.

She was a noteworthy success — therefore Avery wanted intensely to know her, to have people see him with her. If only he might be standing there, singing with her! His voice was immeasurably better than her partner's.

Their waiter served sparkling burgundy.

"To our guest — and success!" Sherbondy proposed with punctilio. They all turned toward Aubrey Milhollin.

"Wait a minute!" supplemented the master of ceremonies. "Shouldn't we have a beautiful woman here to make the moment complete?"

Avery silently supported this suggestion with all his heart.

"Well, who shall she be?"

Franklyn Squires intended without doubt to faze the intrepid Sherbondy when he drawled out:

"My vote goes to the telephone lady."

"Done!" snapped the man of affairs. Avery held his breath while Sherbondy walked unhesitatingly across the floor to the table where rested the divinity, with her singing partner and another man. After a moment, he came back — incredibly! — with Miss Tommy Townley in tow.

At her approach, they had all leaped up, fat Lucius pathetically eager, the two newspaper men at last dropping the cloak of boredom. When they were introduced, Avery tried to put his silent adoration into his look, and it seemed to him her scornful dark eyes lingered a moment on his, as if in recognition that he was somehow different from the rest — that both of them, he and she, were somehow apart from all the staring pack of guzzlers that thronged the Constantinople café. That moment of mutual discovery made him more slavishly hers than ever.

Sherbondy was explaining:

"We want you to join us in a toast, Miss Townley — a toast of success to our friend here, Aubrey Millhollin."

Avery joined the others in turning toward his boyhood and college friend. Aubrey's black eyes quivered behind his large round spectacles, his tanned skin seemed darker than ever, his peculiarly formed head twitched nervously. Avery slightly resented the distraction of Miss Tommy's attention from himself.

"What's the idea?" issued from the disdainful enchantress' lips.

"Why, on Monday next, he's off for New York," Saul Sherbondy said. "Going to write plays, going to be famous." He raised his glass again. "Drink deep!"

"Deep it is, sir." Four masculine throats, one femininely lovely, palpitated with descending burgundy.

"Sit down with us a moment," urged Sherbondy.

Alfred Lucius spoke up. "Sure. You're in no hurry."

"I s'pose that ass is going to start, now there's a woman around." Avery was profoundly gratified when Miss Townley paid no heed to the humourist. Instead her meaningful brown eyes glanced, half nervously, back to the table she had quitted.

But her partner was smoking a cigaret abstractedly; and the second man — bald, diffident-looking and apparently negligible — stared toward the orchestra.

"Come on. Fred won't mind." Sherbondy alone had fully read her look.

The idol of the café sat. The gods were good to Avery; she was between him and Sherbondy. To complete his rapture, Lucius had apparently relapsed into silence.

"Now, I'll show you a real drink," said their fugleman. A waiter quickly fetched oranges, lemons, gin and other ingredients. Sherbondy set about peeling an orange.

"My own invention," said he. "Wait till you try it."

Miss Townley reclined impassive. Her unenthusiastic preoccupation protected her like strong armour. She did not take the trouble to be polite to them, and they all worshipped her *pro tanto*.

Avery's ardour insisted on being articulate.

"Your singing is wonderful. And I *know* — I'm a singer myself."

Her mysterious eyes recognized his tribute — and yet so unmovedly. He had a painful reaction, swore

at himself for an idiot. Still she did look interested — or didn't she? He couldn't be sure. He began imagining that her brief glance had been pregnant with some deep meaning.

"Here we are!" Sherbondy interrupted.

With a match he ignited the potion he had been preparing. A blue flame poised weirdly over the bowl an instant, then the brew trickled into cordial glasses.

"To Sherbondy!" called Franklyn Squires.

The mixture cauterized Avery's throat and gullet. Lucius' eyes blinked tears. The guest of honour burst into a tremendous cough. Their Divinity alone remained unperturbed.

"Great Jehovah!" choked Aubrey Milhollin. "What in the name of saltpeter do you call the stuff, Saul?"

"That, my boy, is none other than the justly celebrated Sherbondy Tonsil Scorchers."

Tommy Townley did not laugh; instead, she looked anxiously once more toward her table. But now the bald-headed man concentrated his gaze upon her.

At once she arose, in spite of objections, bestowed upon them a curt, half-amicable nod — once more it seemed to Avery that she singled him out as much as she could without being conspicuous — and departed with Sherbondy.

A noticeable lull followed. Avery found himself thinking, for no reason at all, about the rehearsal he was missing. He visualized the director beating time, the chorus choir ploughing through the offertory anthem. He had promised to be at the church in the

morning; he could help with the hymns anyway. He thought, too, of his mother. What would she say if she could have seen him? She didn't even suspect that he drank. He calculated with regret that the evening must be nearly at an end. It must be almost eleven. He noted people leaving the café, and looked at his watch. It was half-past twelve!

"But I've got to go!" he insisted, as they stood in the September moonlight in front of the Constantinople's towering façade, waiting for Saul Sherbondy to drive up in his automobile.

"All b-bunk!" scoffed Aubrey Milhollin, a little thickly. "Jus' the shank of the evening."

"Here's Saul now!" Squires announced.

Avery did not join the others in looking up the street. At the instant, he perceived Miss Tommy Townley coming through the rotating front door of the hotel, followed closely by a man, whom, though hatted, he identified as the bald-headed person. They passed near him—but quite as if he had been six hundred feet away, instead of six—and into a cream-bodied taxicab. It gave him a bitter wrench to see the taxi door close upon his romance.

"Throw him in, if he won't go," he heard Aubrey directing.

He found himself in the front seat, Sherbondy at his right watching him keenly, the others in the tonneau. He had made no resistance. He was hoping fervently that some miracle might keep him near that suddenly odious taxicab.

The big car started.

"What's it going to be now, boys?" demanded Sherbondy. "The usual trip?"

Complete concordance acclaimed him from the rear seat. Avery was in the grip of a seething agitation; he suspected what the "usual trip" might be. "Going down the line" was an experience he had never tasted, principally through some obscure fear.

Even more inflaming was the sight of the cream-coloured taxicab in front of them. If Saul Sherbondy had definitely decided to track the Constantinople's reigning queen and her fortunate companion, he could not have directed the course of his machine more accurately. Always he remained a discreet half block in the rear.

Presently, the taxicab's red light blazed more brightly. It had stopped, in front of a small apartment building. Avery fancied he saw his Divinity emerge — then the man. The taxi was just starting again as the big touring car passed by.

He heard a low, half-taunting voice in his ear:

"Say farewell to the Adored One — she's another man's for tonight."

His shocked glance discovered Sherbondy's knowing eye upon him.

"D'you mean —"

"Fred's a rich man. Rich men have a way of being irresistible. She's his girl — in fact, I might say, his mistress. But cheer up, my boy. There remain many others."

Avery told himself he would never have entered the place if the disillusion as to character of Miss Townley

had not temporarily filled him with reckless irresponsibility. At that, he found himself greatly let down by the interior of the evil house and its inmates. Positively, there was nothing alluring about the situation at all. They all sat around drinking beer — he for his part endeavouring to conceal his repugnance toward the slatternly, rouged women who came into the little reception room. And this was the best house in the city. He almost smiled when he remembered once skulking about the exterior, wishing that he might find the courage to enter its portals and come to grips with the Romance and Beauty within. And now — tawdry furniture and tawdrier women. A man would have to be a lot drunker than he to find the thing attractive. He thought of the "Telephone Song"; his heart sank.

There came a sudden banging on the door, and a sound of splintering. A woman screamed, with a fierce shrillness quite beyond Avery's experience.

"The police!" shrieked a red-haired girl in their room.

For the moment, frantic unreasoning terror sank its teeth into Avery's heart. He might have known that divine wrath would descend and smite him for his sin in entering this place of licentiousness. He had read of these raids. All in that instant, he pictured the trip to the police station, the night in the cell, the newspapers, the loss of his reputation and employment and friends — his mother killed by the disgrace. He thought of his father. Strangely, the vision of his cousin, Ruby McPhee, took form in his mind. The

remembrance of her niceness, her purity, filled his heart with poignant longing. He could hear her pronouncing his doom, just as she had Lucius' a few nights ago: "He's positively vulgar. No culture at all."

A policeman entered the room and surveyed their anxious faces.

"No, she ain't here," he called back through the door.

That admirable man of many parts, Saul Sherbondy, approached the intruder with easy assurance.

"What's doing, Officer?"

"Nothin' much." The policeman grinned. "One of the Madam's girls pinched a guy's roll here earlier in the evenin'."

That wild screaming began again — now from the upper story of the house. It grew rapidly louder, interrupted by hysterical oaths and obscenities, and an occasional gruff command.

"Guess they got her all right," the policeman said and withdrew.

All the room's occupants crowded to the door that gave upon the hallway.

"It's Birdie," the red-haired girl told one of the others.

Avery caught a glimpse of the woman — still screaming — as she was hustled past by two patrolmen.

She suddenly screeched:

"Wait till I see the — who says I stole his money!"

"Oh, shut up, you damned —— !" an officer's voice fulminated.

"Take your damned hands off me, you ——"

Her voice was muffled all at once. Then the front door slammed.

Avery felt sickened. Without warning, an uncontrollable nausea came upon him. He found himself drooling in a dark hallway.

"Too much Tonsil Scorcher," diagnosed Alfred Lucius, who supported his convulsed form.

The sympathetic note in the abominable one's voice moved Avery to frank confession:

"I'm an awful fool! Thanks."

"Don't mention it!" cheerfully returned Lucius. "I've been waiting all evening for a chance to apologize for being such a damned ass myself, the other night."

They measured each other anew.

"Let's go back to the bunch," the reformed comedian suggested.

But there was no verve left in any of the quintette.

"Come again soon, boys!" The auburn-haired woman did the valedictory honours with philosophical good grace. She glanced toward Avery. "An' leave young Jesus home next time."

3

Avery derived little pleasure from the church service next morning. He was very tired and atrabilious; faint echoes of his nausea made him shiver slightly from

time to time. The lining of his mouth seemed swollen; and when he sang, he emitted an unmusical croaking noise.

Most unhappy, though, he felt over the way his mother had acted. It was almost three o'clock when he reached home; he had stolen into the apartment like a ghost. The first thing he heard was Agatha's sobbing, and he realized with a pang that he was in for a trying scene.

So genuine her grief, so pitiful her condition, that a great weight seemed to roll down on his heart. Some renegade acquaintance, he learned, had told her of her son's drinking in college. This she had refused to believe without direct evidence. Now her worst apprehensions were confirmed. As she lay sleepless, she had imagined him in much more grievous sins than he had actually been committing. Her greatest fear — the legacy of her husband's depravity — seemed realized.

At the painful recollection of his futile argument with her, Avery sighed. He could put no heart into the hymns; the anthems he dared not even try because of his absence from the rehearsal. The choir leader had evidently not taken his truancy with too great equanimity. He had told Avery he wished to see him after morning service. Ah, well! That doubtless presaged expulsion from the choir. Avery reflected gloomily upon the wages of sin.

But the choir-master merely wanted to tell him of an opening in the quartette of the Bethany Congregational Church.

"You're getting good enough to do quartette work," he set forth briefly. "You read like a streak, and your voice is pretty well filed down. There's nothing more for you in this chorus stuff. I'll give you a note to Leonard Dauchy, the director."

Mind masters matter. Avery's throbbing head and disquieted stomach ceased to trouble. He forgot the depressing scene with his mother. He got a good deal of fun out of singing; it seemed to liberate and satisfy some deep mystic need within him. Of late he had begun to cherish musical ambitions. In the chorus choir he had picked up a quantity of small talk about the leading vocalists of the city. Nearly every one in the choir talked confidently of singing in a quartette some day; that was the supreme desideratum. Most of them, Avery had the musical sense to realize, would end their days in the chorus; a limited few might win promotion eventually. There was much talk about teachers, about such technical subjects as breath-control and head-tones.

In these discussions, the name of Leonard Dauchy was extremely conspicuous. He was one of the prominent vocal instructors of the city. "He's a good teacher, but not much of a tenor": this was the usual verdict. An interesting rumour about him was his reputed "stand-in" with the more exclusive social circles. He had a downtown studio, it was said, where he gave fascinating musical teas for his fashionable patrons. Any woman in the chorus choir would have gladly sold her soul for an invitation to one of these affairs.

In brief, Leonard Dauchy was a man of influence and entrée, a glamorous figure; and Avery's tone, when he finally telephoned, was very nearly supplicating.

"Oh, yes — Cline spoke to me about you," recollected Dauchy. His voice was very casual, almost bored. "Let me see — you're studying with —"

"Mrs. Albany."

"Hm. Well now, I think there'll be a try-out next Friday night, at the church. Suppose you call me the middle of the week. By the way, do you read well?"

"Mr. Cline thinks so," Avery divulged.

"Because it happens I often change my mind about a selection the very last minute, and we sing something new without any rehearsal at all."

Avery's excitement produced no counter thrill at all in Mrs. Albany, the unpretentious, little-known, vocal teacher who had been putting him through the delights of *solfeggio* during the past year.

"I don't believe you've had enough voice production work yet." She shook her greying head a little sadly. "And I, personally, have never thought Mr. Dauchy could teach the fundamentals. He may be a good coach."

"But I'm not going to take lessons of him."

Mrs. Albany smiled a little. "I doubt that you'll get the place, in that event. Voice teachers have about as much ethics as burglars. But perhaps I'm unjust. You might see what happens."

His mother, too, was lukewarm. Singing was a nice accomplishment for a young man, she said, but she

thought there was such a thing as getting too much interested in it. "It'll take your mind off your work."

"Honestly, mother," protested Avery, "it's getting so I know in advance that you'll object to anything I really want to do. You don't understand: singing is just a sideline with me. It's my diversion. You'd rather have me do that than go out every night and play cards, or something like that."

That ought to have proved unanswerable, but Agatha stubbornly kept on prating about "character-building" and "hard-work," till he slammed the apartment door behind him and departed for a walk.

On Friday night, he followed instructions and went directly to the minister's study, on the ground floor of the Bethany Congregational Church. Five other candidates were there. Nobody knew any one else; they all sat and stared at each other uncomfortably. Attempts at light conversation died wretchedly.

The study door opened.

"Mr. Cope," called an indistinct figure.

The youth with large bulbous nose and heavy jaw started to his feet, seized the two copies of his song, and disappeared through the doorway. The study door closed.

That was all. The survivors sat benumbed, as if waiting the summons to the scaffold. The silence was unnerving. No sound of pipe organ or voice penetrated.

Mr. Cope suddenly reappeared, and the second victim subduedly went forth to his fate.

"Say, Cope, what do they do to you?" One of

the remaining candidates thus burst the bonds of conventional frigidity.

Cope was resuming his overcoat. His features reflected no gratification. "Say, I ask you, how can they expect a man to do his best under such conditions?"

The curiosity grew tenser.

"What conditions? — Well, what d' you know about that?"

Cope had bestowed a final angry look upon his rivals and stalked out without answering.

A third candidate answered the call, then the summoning voice announced:

"Mr. Zell."

Avery, in a scarcely successful attempt to ease the strain, had been looking through the song he had brought with him. He stood up nervously and passed through that portentous portal.

His eyes blinked. His conductor had led him through dimly lighted corridors and up a flight of winding stairs. Suddenly they had emerged from darkness into full illumination. In a moment, he realized he was in the choir loft. To his right sat the organist in front of the gleaming-white terraced manuals. To the left, at either end of the music rack, stood large round globes of light on bronze standards. Beyond was a measureless, formless void of darkness.

"Got any gum, Leonard?" demanded the organist, in discreet tones.

So this was the famous Dauchy. Avery, eyeing his conductor with boundless awe, was a little disappointed.

The teacher-tenor looked more like a business man than an artist. His grey tweed suit was as brisk as his movements and gestures. He was short and slender. A high collar and brilliant cravat led the way to his somewhat apoplectic face, punctuated by a long sharp nose, thin lips — the lower one protruding,— and hazel, slightly bulging, eyes with a perpetual “you’ve-got-to-show-me” expression. Only his fluffy, grey hair defended his musicianship. It stood up from his square forehead a full three inches, not thickly, but with a downy, irrepressible kinkiness; he wore it parted precisely in the middle; on both sides of this line of demarkation rose and fell regular curving waves, like swells from the sharp prow of a steamer.

Avery was about to introduce himself with some degree of formality, when Dauchy, totally disregarding the amenities, dashed down the staircase and left him alone with the organist.

“I hope for Lord’s sake you’re not going to ask me to play something hard.” The organist reached for the sheet music. “Oh, an old chestnut, eh? Well, spout ’er out!”

Avery had chosen, with some care, Gounod’s “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” The organist’s gibe hardly increased his small stock of self-confidence, but he stepped forward to the choir rail and waited the organ’s introductory phrases. Somewhere in that black vacuum, into which he now peered — with the expression of unassailable rectitude worn by all church singers — lay in ambush the members of the musical committee — and doubtless by this time, Leonard

Dauchy — their eyes and ears focussed on his defenceless figure. A single point of dull light glowed now and then in the midst of the void. Avery was conscious of being amused at himself for thinking it might be a cigar end.

Still, he sang fairly well. It was quite impossible for him, in fact, ever to sing badly. Something in the very nature of musical sound — in the case of a song he really liked, especially — always dragged him off the shore of self-consciousness into the full current of emotion, and then buoyed him up reassuringly. He could almost forget himself, once under way. Tonight, his voice was not at its best, to be sure. It never was when he wanted it to be. A slightly breathy huskiness frayed its edges. He had his usual difficulty, too, with the upper notes, particularly when he must sing broad vowels. Thus, the words, "love," and "guide," occurring in this song on D above middle C, he never could produce satisfactorily. The tone was either too muffled or too explosively "open."

The organist returned his sheet music. "How many more are there?" His tones were dejected, imposed-on.

"A couple." He heard Leonard Dauchy calling him from the bottom of the staircase. The fatigued boredom of these two musicians he could not understand. He himself still throbbed with the exaltation of his singing, though by now he was suffering from a reaction of pessimism. He had an expansive impulse to tell the surviving candidate, back in the minister's study, just what had happened; but some unus-

pected instinct of craftiness interposed: "Why give him any help? Let him go up against the same thing as you've had to."

He spent a good part of the night in telling himself how much better he might have sung. Scores of perfectly produced, resonant, high notes seemed to issue from his lips, as he went through the experience again, imaginatively, time and time again. By morning, he was convinced he had no chance. He was woe-begone.

Alfred Lucius came into his office shortly before noon, and hurled a hand-grenade.

"I enjoyed hearing you sing last night."

"You —"

"Sure — me." The chubby Court Jester laughed uproariously at Avery's paralysed amazement. "Say, when in God's name is that ass, Lucius, going to stop butting into my affairs?" he mimicked; then laughed even louder at Avery's red face.

"Look here," Avery managed to get out, "were you really in that church?"

"Of course." Lucius' gurgling diminished. "I'll have you know I'm the most valuable member of the music committee. Why, Leonard Dauchy and I run the music — that is, Leonard runs me, and I run the committee. Last night, I was the whole committee — nobody else showed up. So I sat and smoked and Leonard told me what to think."

"I'll be hanged!"

"It's a simple matter. My father is one of the trustees of the church. My glory is all reflected. I just

go to church to please him. But say — about your singing."

The thought that Lucius might help him had gradually been supplanting all others in Avery's mind. He listened attentively.

"Of course, I don't know anything about music. I told Leonard you were a friend of mine, and he said you had a nice voice, but didn't know how to sing — a good teacher could put you on the right track in no time."

In spite of his anxiety, Avery smiled. So this was how it was done.

"So who got the berth?" he queried easily. Lucius was clearly an innocent catspaw; it would be silly to try to make him understand.

"Well, Leonard seemed to think the fellow who sang right after you was the best, but we left it this way: that chap is going to sing tomorrow and you're going to sing a week from tomorrow." As an afterthought, he added: "I asked Len if I could tell you what he thought, and he said, 'Sure,— go ahead!'"

Avery's inward grimace broadened. "I'll just bet he did, old top," he told himself.

With a display of prodigious reasoning, Lucius suggested:

"Why don't you get Len for your teacher? He's the best in town."

"I'll think it over, Alfred. Darned good of you to go to all this trouble."

"And he can boost you fast, too." Lucius merely bowed his acknowledgment. "He's got the inside

track with the best people in town. You ought-a see the pippins that go to his teas."

Next week, when Leonard Dauchy telephoned him about singing the following Sunday, Avery's mind was very uncertain. Mrs. Albany could never push him ahead as rapidly as Dauchy; she was a little too slow and humdrum in her methods, he felt; she didn't seem to comprehend that in him she had an exceptionally gifted pupil, who could be advanced rapidly through the preparatory exercises: and yet the idea of deserting her did somehow convict him of disloyalty. But his preliminary taste of solo work had spoiled chorus singing for him. If he enrolled under the Dauchy banner, he could look forward to alluring vistas: quartette work, with compensation of eight dollars a Sunday; increasing musical prominence; the unknown world of teas and — "pippins."

In the end, he went up to Leonard Dauchy's famous studio and tried to straddle the issue.

"I feel I need coaching," he began:

The famous voice specialist stopped him. "Now, don't tell me you want me to give you lessons."

"Why, yes."

"Quite impossible. Couldn't fit you in. I've got more to do now than I can attend to." Dauchy, in a brilliant gown of figured silk, was a remote and inaccessible superman, sending down pronouncements to a prostrate suppliant.

"But what am I to do?" Avery's surprise and disappointment left him completely helpless. The alluring vistas gradually faded out. He had come to the

studio in a condescending frame of mind, with the intention of letting Dauchy coach him and simultaneously taking lessons in voice production from Mrs. Albany.

"You aren't ready for coaching yet, anyway. What you need is voice production. Who's your teacher? I've forgotten."

Instead of replying unashamedly: "Mrs. Frances Albany," Avery said:

"A Mrs. Albany."

"Yes, I think I've met her. A very nice woman, but —" He laid aside his cigaret, and sat down at the grand piano. "Let me hear you on some scales." He struck a chord. "Ah —" he sang.

If there was one vowel sound that gave Avery especial difficulty, it was a broad A; but he did his best. The celebrated coach looked up at him with the encouraging expression of a man who wants to use strong language, but restrains himself.

"As I thought," he pronounced. "Yet the natural quality of your voice is lovely. Really, it's a shame —" He broke off his excited walking back and forth to ask: "Suppose I did fit you in. Would you be willing to work?"

Avery indicated with great earnestness that he would be. Leonard Dauchy began fingering his engagement book.

"You know, I really think we might do something for that voice of yours," he said. "And you look as if you had musical intelligence." He surveyed his visitor sharply. "College man? I thought so."

Some final flickering of the youthful Utopist in

Avery ventured, haltingly enough, his scheme for taking lessons from two teachers.

"Quite out of the question." The engagement book snapped shut. "Our methods are antithetical: what one of us taught you, the other would tear down."

Leonard Dauchy moved toward the door with such an air of finality that the last vertebra of Avery's backbone jellied. Ultimately, the popular tenor did manage to fit him in; ultimately, too, the musical columns of the press heralded forth his appointment as bass soloist of the Bethany Congregational Church. But the published items were puzzlingly discrepant. The Saturday afternoon paper had it:

The position of bass soloist in the Bethany Congregational Church has been given to Mr. Avery Zell, a pupil of Mrs. Frances Albany.

The musical page of the Sunday morning paper ran his picture, and under it, the announcement:

Avery Zell, a pupil of the well known voice expert, Leonard Dauchy, has been appointed — etc.

4

He had sensed that this tea would be quite different from those he had previously graced. Leonard Dauchy had some time since confessed, with that characteristic, cynical frankness of his, that he never mixed the various social classes represented by his women pupils. "You've got to keep 'em apart," he insisted; and his device was an indistinguishable series of teas, some of them more fashionable than others. His so-

cial gift was genuinely remarkable. No one but he knew how he arranged and appraised these affairs; therefore no one could be quite sure she was being slighted.

But when Avery observed that Alfred Lucius was not in the studio, his intuition became certainty. He had been somewhat taken aback by his obese friend's presence at those earlier functions, for no sane judge would pronounce Alfred a social asset. Manifestly, he was being invited because of his influence at the church. This afternoon, however, neither he nor those several women pupils Avery had previously encountered, were visible.

Subtle indications corroborated the fact he had now achieved the Best Set. Here today were obviously no Glittering Doubtfuls. He perceived the noticeably quieter garb of the two dozen women who sat so self-assuredly about the long room. They did not have to resort to the startling, the bizarre, in apparel, in order to convince of their social status. They did not feel it necessary to hurl themselves at one, lest they be overlooked.

Or, perhaps, Avery's ready-to-be-impressed imagination caught the picture a little out of focus.

Dauchy, in morning coat, led him about the studio for introduction. Unconsciously, his eyes were searching for attractive girls. The older women received his courtliest deference, but really, to him they were unimportant. What he unknowingly wanted from this candle-lighted room was Romance.

Four or five girls met his inquiring look. He was

in no condition to distinguish between them. At first glance they all seemed so perfect, all alluring, all beautiful. He craved a moment's quiet comparison, but Dauchy, with his acute sense of social management, terminated the problem by deftly inserting him between two middle-aged women; with them he could be quite safe. They could receive his profoundest obeisance with composure.

Perhaps, though, they afforded quiet anchorage, whence he could look forth upon those five radiant creatures and make his appraisal. One of them, directly opposite, he could watch while feigning a breathless interest in what Mrs. Milburn was saying about the servant problem.

The girl across the way occasionally returned his gaze with vague interest. She was wearing a charming little toque that seemed at one and the same time to corroborate the piquancy of her small, lightly retroussé nose and the soft imagination of her large, brown eyes. As he looked at her, he forgot the four others. She should be his Eternal Quest. She conversed spiritedly with a very young man with thin face and plastered-down hair. When she laughed, the corners of her mouth turned upward with breath-taking abruptness and disclosed white teeth that could only be described as cunning.

"Mr. Milburn threatens to get rid of all of them and hire a few Japs," the voice to his left confided; and he nodded with complete sympathy.

Did Leonard Dauchy expect him to sit with these two matrons all afternoon? He fidgeted uneasily; when

tea was being served, he became ubiquitous in the hope that some one else might take his place. A few of the other people shifted locations, but always that empty chair of his stared at him accusingly.

"Can't we have a little music?" some one at the far end of the room asked.

Dauchy laughed. "We ought to be able to." His eyes rested on Avery. "How about it — do you feel like singing?"

"Oh, do, Mr. Zell," said the lady on his right.

He stood up uncertainly.

"Nerissa!" called Mrs. Milburn. "Come over here while Mr. Zell is singing."

The adorable girl opposite approached obediently and occupied the vacant chair.

Avery was staggered. Oh, if he had only known that Mrs. Milburn was her mother! All at once he felt convicted of gross rudeness to Mrs. Milburn. His heart was bleeding with remorse.

Dauchy was already on the piano bench, in the act of disengaging his coat-tails.

"What'll it be, Avery?" He looked up with a faint smile of inquiry. The two were on terms of complete friendliness — almost of equality. He had done a great deal for Avery, and some day Avery would repay him many-fold by bringing him increased prestige as a teacher.

Avery debated. He was sure he wanted to sing something big, something splendid. He meant to show this wonderful Nerissa and her mother that he was as redoubtable in the musical firmament as they in the

social. Dauchy had added many new songs to his repertoire, and two whole tones — E and F — to the upper range of his voice; had given him a certain finish of vocal performance; and yet, in his despondent moods, Avery was not at all sure his singing had genuinely improved. That old trouble with his upper register persisted. His head tones were either too "covered" or too "open"; he could not manage a really vibrant, ringing quality. And his voice felt tired too often — as if he were straining it.

"Could I do the 'Prologue'?"

The fashionable teacher betrayed a shade of doubt. "Why, yes, I guess so. Surely."

Avery believed that his "Pagliacci" solo — he had only recently learned, in pronouncing the name of the opera, to omit the "g" — was by all odds his most effective number. He had never studied Italian, but he had faithfully memorized the meaningless words.

He decided to ignore the doubt in his teacher's tone.

Dauchy got through the introductory scales a little sketchily, and Avery delivered himself of the opening declamations with fair credit. He could feel his audience's close attention. "A new baritone," he fancied it murmuring. His eyes wandered about the dimly lit, long room, and through the leaded windows at the far end into the obscurity of the late March afternoon. He had an odd habit of taking mental photographs even in the midst of his most fervid singing.

The tenderer phase, "Un nido di memorie," came expressively through his parted lips. He found he was looking straight at Miss Milburn. Consternation tin-

gled through his straining diaphragm: the goddess of his new-formed shrine was not listening to his quivering personal message. Her head was partly turned away. She smiled toward the youth with the plastered hair.

Yet he must keep on singing, as if his disillusion were not bitterly garroting him. His eyes roved around the wall and paused on a striking silhouette of Notre Dame, illumined by a candle, near the white door. The vivid ochre of the sunset sky behind the black mass of the cathedral fascinated him a moment. Then his gaze dropped uncertainly upon a pair of very young and beautiful eyes. The eyes were azure, he thought — like the sky near the horizon; and they were fixed upon him with an intensity of interest that had separated a little two rather thick lips. An instant's impression of a full face and a certain indefinable smartness of attire lodged itself on the sensitive film of his mind.

Reassured, quite solaced, he took thought for the song's climax — so tremendous, so taxing vocally, that he almost regretted his choice. Internally, he was a flux of disquietude reaching forward to that high note at the end; outwardly, he maintained the unconvincing smile that must never depart from the faces of musical artists — or professional contortionists. The momentous instant flew toward him.

“— al pari di *VOI* —”

Bang! He had hit it — and was valiantly defying the world to make him let go. He winked rapidly. Mutual comprehension passed telepathically between

his listeners and himself; he knew, and he knew they knew — and they knew he knew — he had not taken the optional high A flat, which any Italian baritone can achieve without turning a hair; further, that he could not have taken it if he had wanted to — that he didn't dare. Perceptible condescension rolled out in a vapour through the room.

Nevertheless — "Bravo!" shouted Leonard Dauchy; the clapping of gloved hands seemed a little more than perfunctory. One woman cried "Bis! Bis!"

A second pupil succeeded him. Avery, in the chair formerly occupied by Miss Milburn, listened with assumed attentiveness, the while he burned to sing again himself. He knew for a certainty he could do so much better a second time; this conviction always tortured him immediately he had concluded a solo. He glanced cautiously toward the girl under the lithograph. Her hat was of alternating black and white strips; under its stiff brim, she displayed a noble profile, still absorbedly turned toward the music. He suffered a slight shock of disappointment that her interest should be so impersonal.

An odd coincidence transpired: Nerissa Milburn was coaxed to the piano, and then this other girl. Whatever uncertainty of choice lingered in Avery forthwith dissolved. His ears supplied a criterion his eyes could not. For the provocative Miss Milburn sang badly; a tremulo marred the sweetness of her light soprano voice; her song was a sentimental nothing. But the young woman Leonard Dauchy ad-

dressed as Miss Copeland sent floating through the oblong studio a lusciousness of tone quality that thrilled by its beauty. She was a contralto — obviously a young singer; her upper notes had a tendency to swoop beyond control. She proved somewhat large of body; her throat was perhaps too full for a girl's. A possible lethargy seemed to hold her — a certain unawakened look. Nerissa Milburn noticeably outstripped her in piquancy and grace. Yet Avery bowed his head and yielded unconditionally to the sleepy, unaroused personality that stood before him, dominating the enclosure by the lovely quality of her voice.

Women began leaving immediately afterwards. Avery drifted about unhappily, uncertain whether or not to draw near the Presence. People were going rapidly now. Soon it would be too late. Fortunately, Miss Copeland still lingered. He saw her approach her host.

"Avery!" called Dauchy.

The rising young baritone came, almost running.

"You met Miss Copeland, didn't you? She's just been complimenting me on your voice."

Trust the temperamental tenor to take all the credit! But Avery was in no mood for petty grievances.

"I've been wanting to tell her how much — how much I liked her singing," he said banally.

Dauchy dashed to the hallway to speed off some influential patron, and they stood by themselves, a little awkwardly. Her self-possession was more practised than his. She began talking, quite easily, about

their common enthusiasm — and yet what she said seemed simple and sincere.

Her mother came up to them, then Dauchy. The others had taken leave. The graciousness of the two women warmed Avery.

Mrs. Copeland threw a sable boa over her left shoulder. "Well, Inez —"

Her daughter assented with a glance of amused obedience. When she held out her hand, she looked at her adorer with a straight frank survey.

"Good-bye — and we must really have some more music, soon."

Mrs. Copeland asked him if they couldn't give him a lift. "Which way do you go?"

Avery would not have confessed for worlds that he lived anywhere in a northwesterly direction. One must live "west," or not live at all. He had the faintest possible notion from her tone that his street might make a difference.

He explained that he must return to the Trust Company's office before going home.

"Can I take you to your car?" Dauchy proffered.

Avery seized upon the cue with avidity. "I'm going down anyway," he almost pleaded.

An alert chauffeur viewed the party's egress from the studio building and piloted his limousine rapidly to the curb. Avery was in a mood of high elation. He was still in the company of these charming, exciting persons. Inez Copeland's suit intrigued him: it was of plain blue serge, but its cut, its lines, were more eloquent than a thousand ornamentations.

Then he was alone on the sidewalk, trying not to stare after the disappearing limousine, imaging what a wonderful life these people must lead, and resolving with sudden potent emotion that he would be worthy of his new acquaintanceship — that some day, not long distant, he would win his place among such as these.

The minute hallway of the Zell apartment appeared more distasteful than ever. His mother was not there, but in her room, he found Winifred, with conflagrant nose, weeping heartbrokenly. Her accentuated homeliness presented a dismal contrast to the lustrous elegance of his new dreams. All at once a sharp pang of dismay assailed him, lest this family of his prove a fatal handicap to his upward progress.

“Well — what’s the matter?”

His sister was inconsolable and inarticulate; and he was in no frame of mind to pamper a snuffing woman.

Then he remembered that today was her birthday.

He bent over her a little more sympathetically.

“What’s the trouble, Bunny? Tell me — maybe I can —”

Little by little the story materialized. She had grown tired of sitting around the house, she said, doing nothing at all. Agatha’s long course of fulsome praise of her talents had inculcated a perfect faith in her that she had but to issue forth and the world would fall prostrate. Today, she had had a happy inspiration. The night before she had seen a newspaper advertisement showing forth the splendours of

a stage career, and requesting talented girls to make application for employment. It occurred to Winifred that she could best celebrate the day by commencing a great career. She visualized the family's open-mouthed bewilderment when, in the middle of the birthday dinner, she should abruptly arise and tell them, very simply, very modestly, what she had done.

Avery was sick with alarm. "She's gone and gotten herself — and all of us — disgraced." Tales of white slave traffic came to vivid life in his memory.

But the episode had a somewhat different dénouement. The man in the dingy theatrical office had stared at her a moment impudently, then burst into cruel laughter.

"What, *you!*" he sniggered. "With *that* *beak!*"

5

As he stood in the small bath-room, shaving in front of the mirror on the door of the medicine cabinet over the wash stand, he eyed himself solemnly. The thought had just occurred to him that in the three-month interval since his first meeting with Inez Copeland, he had completely made himself over. Then, he had laboured under the absurd delusion that he was cutting a not displeasing figure. Now he viewed that earlier self with contemptuous amusement. He had been — he searched his vocabulary for a fitting expression, and hit upon a newly acquired adjective — yes, he had been just *gauche*.

The face in the mirror had new lines of dignity and distinction, it seemed to him. Those grave compelling

eyes — what woman so frivolous as to fail to be arrested by them? His hair spoke of the expert barber's care; a quarter of a year ago, he had not known how much a real haircut could add to a man's stature. But after all, the real improvement had been subjective. Before, he had been an uncultured lout, in spite of his college degree; he knew nothing of art, of literature — almost nothing about music. Now, he spoke fluently, if warily, of Debussy, and the influence of the Barbizon School. He could go to a symphony concert and criticize the oboist harshly. The royalties of H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw must have been markedly swollen by his favouring comments. Yet his development had not been one-sided: his social manner had become positively *dégagé*; he secretly aspired to be known as brilliantly cynical. He had learned that Château Yquem was not the name of a salad, and he could dance the Boston.

Finishing his ablutions, he helped himself to a pinch of Winifred's rouge, and spread it over his skin with an excess of carefulness. His face became unpleasantly pale toward the end of a dance unless he took this precaution. Returning to his room, he removed the two enormous calf-bound volumes of an ancient *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from his dress-trousers, outstretched on the floor; by this simple device he kept the garments in a very fair state of press. His fingernails received attention next. Several weeks ago he had discarded his pocketknife, in favour of a nail-file. Ten minutes more, and he was bestowing upon his concluded toilet a last critical inspection. Halfway out of the door, he

remembered to come back and put another collar in his pocket — against the evil moment when his first collar should have become a pitiful melted thing.

He braced himself for the unpleasant leave-taking from the family. His mother, who was beginning to look old, paused in her occupation of frying steak and potatoes for supper, and kissed him good-bye; but there was that, even in her kiss, to tell him of her disapproval — as if she were saying once more:

“I’ll be so glad when you get through all this gadding around, all this music craze. There’s nothing permanent in it. None of these society girls would think of marrying you. It takes your mind off your business, too. The wise thing for you to do is to marry some nice girl without any airs, and settle down.”

The farewell of his sister was likewise disapproving. She took little pains to conceal her sullenness. By implication she demanded why he couldn’t ever manage to take her with him.

Agatha’s significant eyes pursued him. He had been looking forward to tonight for two weeks; he had not even seen Inez during that time, and now he was going to breathe her charm — not only tonight, but tomorrow, at Leonard Dauchy’s party for the Homer concert. Yet his eagerness now began to confound itself. Was it really true he was making a terrific fool of himself over Inez Copeland?

Leonard Dauchy had been very peculiar lately. Avery remembered his saying, shortly after the memorable tea:

"Now see here, Avery, you and I get along beautifully together, and I can help you quite a bit. There's just one rule I ask you to observe: don't go falling in love with any woman you meet in my studio. See? It would hurt my business — I couldn't afford it. Fond mammas are too much inclined to be leery of studio teas, as it is."

He had carefully avoided mentioning to Dauchy most of his engagements with Inez. Whose business was it anyway, except hers and his? Perhaps it was an uneasy conscience in him that interpreted Dauchy's recent sharp glances as suspicious. Well, he didn't intend to give up Inez' friendship for all the Dauchys in the world! Inez herself liked him: that sufficed.

Some unhappy presentiment seemed but a step away from him all evening. He suspected that Inez was subtly withholding herself. Yet she had never seemed quite so charming. There were other girls at this dinner-dance tonight who were more sparkling, more magnetic, more dashing — far more attractive, according to conventional standards — even to Avery's prejudiced eyes. Inez was not even a good dancer. Yet he loved her, shyly, for the undeveloped beauty of her eyes, for her potential nobility of mind, for her incomparable speaking voice.

For the first time, he was keenly suffering from doubts about himself, about the outcome of their odd friendship. A congealing fear came upon him that she was hopelessly out of his class. Who was he, anyway? A nobody — a worse than nobody. The infamy of his father was on the public records of the

circuit court; who wished might read. What if Mrs. Copeland could see Winifred — as he had seen her — with her homely nose and teeth, sobbing out the story of her visit to the theatrical agent; or his mother, in her cotton house-dress, frying steak and potatoes?

A most distressing accident helped humiliate him. In the midst of the salad course, he bit on something hard — possibly, a piece of nut shell — and in another moment realized that a large porcelain inlay in one of his upper front teeth had come out. His tongue located the inlay at length, and he managed to get it out of his mouth and into his pocket. But its absence left a seemingly enormous gap. His sibilants became thick, as if he were slightly intoxicated. He dared not laugh, and he must mumble his words like a ventriloquist, lest his upper lip disclose his shame.

When Inez told him, about ten o'clock, that she must leave, he was ineffably relieved. Her mother had loaned the limousine for the return trip, and he had the grateful sensation of saving the staggering taxicab fare. The darkness of the limousine — and of the Copeland drawing room, when Inez asked him in — was incredibly soothing after the glare of the ball room; now he might talk a little more freely without having the catastrophe discovered.

Then she broke the news to him that her mother and she were leaving the city tomorrow to spend the summer in New Hampshire.

"I don't suppose I'll see you again." And if the separation brought her any grief, she masked it completely.

That his self-control was well-nigh as admirable as hers, was Avery's only consolation afterwards. But inside, he felt as if some prodigious aerolith had buried him a dozen feet under ground. His squirming mind reached out for the truth. To him, at any rate, there could be but one explanation: Mrs. Copeland didn't like this unconventional new friendship; she had probably had him looked up, and knew the sordid family scandal. Perhaps Inez herself wanted to be rid of him — as kindly as possible.

He started to burst forth:

"Good Lord Inez, I'm not going to run off with you. I'll leave it to you if I've made love to you at all." But he had the sound judgment to remain silent.

He leaned forward in front of the hearth, and searched the fire that played through the rifts in the cannel coal. Her presence and the old room's dignity and restraint transmitted his sadness into something quite exalted. He almost enjoyed his woe. Later on, with no audience, with no sense of noblesse oblige — when the anaesthesia had left his lungs — he would find out what real suffering meant.

Inez left her chair and moved toward a table behind him. He heard her approach him, felt her hand on his shoulder. In that instant, he knew he had not been mistaken in her, that she was as thoroughly fine as he had imagined. He took her hand and pressed it hard against his breast. He did not look up at her.

She sat down again and began talking, very simply, about herself.

"I've almost made up my mind I care more about music than anything else in life — except of course, my father and mother."

"Then why not break away from all this?" he found himself pleading. "Why don't you go to New York and really work? You've got the voice."

She shook her head uncertainly. "I couldn't leave my mother. I've talked about going away, and she says she'd be terribly lonesome without me. It wouldn't be right."

He couldn't help becoming urgent. "Not right? Isn't it right to do the thing you most want to do? Isn't it wrong not to do it? You'll never get anywhere as long as you stick around this town."

"Perhaps not." She smiled quietly. "But selfishness never really pays, do you think? No, I won't go away, at least not now. I'll do all I can here, but with some other teacher."

His eyes opened a little.

"I'm through with Mr. Dauchy. I don't believe he's a good teacher. He cares too much about quick results — not enough for the fundamentals." She turned her calm face his way. "Frankly, I think he strains voices — yours, among others. But beyond that — I dislike him. He's a poseur, and he's double-faced. I've found that out."

He said good-bye with an effect of casualness, and stepped out into a disenchanted night. He took time from his gnawing self-pity to be curious about Leonard Dauchy — to wonder if his musical sponsor could

possibly be involved in this puzzling, enforced separation between Inez and himself.

Dauchy would doubtless give his concert party tomorrow night, in spite of her absence. Avery accordingly left the street car and let himself into the darkened quarters of the Fidelity Trust Company, where he performed a mystifying rite. In his own office, the window shades were already drawn. Twisting the hood of his desk-lamp so that the light shone away from him, he proceeded swiftly to remove his spring overcoat — his coat and vest — then his collar and dress-shirt. He wrapped the shirt in a newspaper and carefully wrote his name on the package. Next, having resumed his coat and vest, and turned his overcoat collar up about his neck, he stole forth from the office and proceeded to the down-town branch of the International Laundry Company. The front door bore a sign in large letters: "One Day Service If Left Before 8 A. M."

Avery looked around. The sordidness of his necessary makeshifts oppressed him — but he really couldn't afford two dress-shirts. No one observed his ignominy; the street was bare and cheerless. His tongue played disconcertingly along the unfamiliar edges of the broken tooth.

Gingerly he dropped the soiled shirt through the slit in the door, and turned away. He would call for it tomorrow night at five o'clock and thus be able to wear it at the Homer concert.

But the expedient proved wholly dispensable. The morning's mail brought this note:

Dear Sir:

It has reached me that you have broken your verbal agreement with me, and have been making somewhat of a nuisance of yourself with one of my pupils — all this, of course, behind my back.

Such deception is unspeakable, sir, and constitutes legal grounds for my cancelling your contract at the Bethany Congregational Church, as well as any future lessons at my studio.

My advice to you is to offer no explanation to any one —

“I suppose that means Alfred Lucius,” Avery commented abstractedly.

— and if you follow this advice, I shall offer no comments myself. Otherwise, you may feel sure I shall not spare you.

Respectfully,
LEONARD DAUCHY.

Chapter Two: Ruby

I

THE dress-shirt, in fact, did not arch its immaculate whiteness over his bosom until nearly four weeks later, when it bestowed its effulgence upon the triumphant public recital of Miss Ruby McPhee — in token of her graduation from the Pansy Westnut Screemer School of Elocution and Dramatic Expression.

The shirt, none too comfortable at any time, was well nigh intolerable this hot June night. Avery's face glistened with perspiration; at intervals a rivulet would course moistly down his chest. He cursed himself for having been let in for the affair. His mother, with that formidable persistence of hers, had finally persuaded him to lend his assistance as general stage manager — a title euphonious, but euphemistic: he found, when the great occasion came, he was not so much a manager as a much-bossed stage carpenter, property man and utility stevedore.

But after all, the affair promised some excitement, which was a blessed relief after his many days of restless despondency. He had heard nothing more from Inez or Leonard Dauchy. His musical career, his social longings, were behind him. He had given up hope of ever seeing Inez again; she had become defi-

nately apotheosized, already a somewhat faint and far-away divinity.

He tip-toed to the peephole in the drop-curtain and squinted through. Concordia Hall was crowded. Two hundred women — and an occasional captive male — fanned themselves and stared toward the stage. Immediately in front sat an odd dozen young women, uniformly in cream-coloured caps and gowns — the graduating class. Most of them had already given their recitals; one or two more nights would bring the commencement exercises. Over this talented bevy hung suspended an aura of conscious virtuosity. In their midst, like a priceless gem set off by minor jewels, coruscated that most celebrated of all female educators, Pansy Westnut Screemer, herself.

Just behind sat a delegation from Bryant, the McPhees' home town — all ready to be entranced by the village's most talented product. Avery recognized Margaret, Ruby's good-looking young sister. Mrs. McPhee, he knew, was helping her artiste-daughter in the dressing room.

His mother was somewhere in the auditorium, but he could not find her — his sister, too, possibly. Winifred no longer concealed her dislike of Ruby. She considered her cousin unbearably affected and conceited.

Avery turned and surveyed the drawing room set he had so laboriously gotten together for the first number. He glanced for the tenth time at the program in his hands, to refresh the recollection of his duties. Two other sets must be installed: the out-door scene

with the rustic bench and papier-mâché colonnade; and the final dark interior for the tragic "Potion Scene from Romeo and Juliet" that closed the recital. Self-consciously he turned to the final page of the program. There, under the "Class Colours," the "Class Flower" and the "Class Motto"—"Know Thyself"—appeared the pleasing words:

Stage Manager for Miss McPhee — Mr. Avery Zell.

It was a delicate and unexpected tribute to his hard work, and he was secretly pleased. It was very thoughtful of Ruby, in the midst of a hundred preoccupations, to have remembered him.

Mrs. McPhee came bustling up, with her characteristic air of disapproval.

"Ruby's ready." Her tone implied they had been waiting for him.

His defence was great formality. "Very well. Wave your handkerchief when you want to begin." He returned to the curtain-winch in the left wings, whence he could see Mrs. McPhee in the right wings.

The first number was a comedy playlet, "Their Strange Reunion," in which Ruby had the assistance of two undergraduates of the school. This pair now took their places in the drawing room on the stage, in languishing attitudes. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. McPhee signalled with her handkerchief, and Avery rolled the drop-curtain briskly upwards.

Expectant applause volleyed into the wings. Just then, Ruby herself appeared at his side. She was at-

tired in man's clothing and a somewhat battered derby. Her face was highly rouged.

Her excitement reached him.

"How is everything?" he whispered. "How're you feeling?"

She granted him a high-strung smile. "Fine."

He shook her hand. "You're going to have a great success." He wanted to give her all the reassurance he could. "I'll be pulling for you every minute."

She really looked at him then. "I'll remember," she said, her eyes back on the scene. Presently she was preparing to go on. Her derby went rakishly over one ear.

"There's my cue!" She took a step forward, then started back, clapping her hands to her small nose.

He understood instantly. "I'll take them." She had forgotten to remove her eye-glasses. Even as she shambled on the stage, she pressed them into his outstretched hand.

The audience laughed at her comic figure. Avery, back at the post of duty, inserted the glasses in his inner pocket with a pardonable pride at having saved the recital. Another instant's delay and the humorous effect would have been ruined.

Having contributed so much, Avery was now aware of a fidgety concern in the success of the evening. He laughed unstintedly over "Their Strange Reunion." The sentimental selections that followed left him deeply moved — especially that one called "Bobby Shaftoe."

Bobby Shaftoe's gone to sea;
He'll come back — *no more* — to me.
Pretty Bobby Shaftoe!

As had been planned, the "Potion Scene" was a sensational climax to the evening. When, at its conclusion, Ruby quaffed the lethal compound and sank upon a convenient sofa, Avery's supposedly sophisticated eyes popped from his head almost as far as the Bryant postmaster's.

He all but forgot to bring the curtain down. Six times, he wound it up for the conquering young graduate's bows. Her classmates were applauding with critical approbation. Even Pansy Westnut Screemer's uplifted palms continued to buffet each other in token of generous praise. Each time Ruby reappeared, an usher brought forward new floral tributes, until the small stage seemed choked with flowers.

Avery experienced a vicarious thrill, in that he was the first person to offer congratulations to the young recitalist, once the curtain was finally down.

"Just wonderful!" he said. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Thank you for all you've done to help."

She was not too excited to remember he had her glasses, without which she was extremely near-sighted. Then she turned to meet the van of the army of relatives and friends that began crowding the stage.

It was Ruby's interval of supreme triumph. She stood in her hastily donned cap and gown, surrounded by flowers, and received the superlatives of her conquered audience like an empress graciously accepting

precious gifts from far-off tributaries. Juliet's parlor could not hide the flaming scarlet of her cheeks. Avery voted most of the crowd hopeless, yet the adulation in the air could not but infect him too. Here, quite beyond doubt, was a talented, gifted girl. He was proud to think he knew her so well, proud to have been so intimately connected with her success.

He now caught sight of Franklyn Squires, and hurried across the stage to meet him. He had solicited the newspaper reporter's attendance at Mrs. McPhee's request, in the hope of getting "something in the papers." None of the other graduation recitals had achieved such publicity, and she felt her daughter's superiority could in no way be more adequately demonstrated.

"How'd you like it?"

Squires eyed him sardonically. "I just got in for part of the last act, and if you ask me"—he lowered his voice—"it was rotten."

Avery was disgusted to detect the odour of beer, and shocked at the sacrilege.

"Say—what the deuce is wrong with you, Franklyn? This isn't a bar room, you know."

"That's all right, old man." Squires became dignity itself. "I won't tell anybody else. Can I meet the little lady? No, don't worry—I'll not gum the party."

Avery, loath to antagonize the power of the press, brought his friend before the throne.

"My friend, Mr. Squires, of the *Journal*."

"Miss McPhee, I desire to add my mite to the con-

gratulations," said Franklyn with a grand air. "I enjoyed every single number. You were superb — and you have a future."

The newspaper man created no little stir among the bystanders.

"How was that?" he demanded after Avery had induced him to move on. "I pride myself there's no situation Franklyn Squires can't live up to."

Avery laughed. "You're all right."

"I'll give her a good story." The reporter crammed a program into his pocket and prepared to put on his new straw hat. "Say, did I tell you about Aubrey Milhollin? He's had a vaudeville sketch accepted, and he thinks he's going to sell a play this week."

"Bully for him!" Avery's tone was absent-minded.

The stage seemed largely deserted when he got back. His mother, young Margaret McPhee, and Ruby's uncle clustered about the centre of attraction. Mrs. McPhee was counting the flowers; soon she came up with the announcement of a total of eleven bouquets and one basket.

"That's more than any one else had," she gloated. "This basket of roses is lovely — did you all see it? It's from Julius, darling." Her eye ran around the little circle until it reached Avery. "He was just sick because he couldn't be here."

"Julius?" queried Mrs. Zell.

"He's Rube's heavy suitor in Bryant," disclosed Margaret McPhee.

Avery endeavoured to conceal his guilty realization that he had sent no flowers.

The survivors made ready to repair to Ruby's rooms where supper was to be celebrated.

"One — two — three — four — five — six," counted Mrs. McPhee. "I'm afraid the taxi will only accommodate four."

The lean uncle suggested that Avery and he take a street-car.

"That would be a shame!" Ruby demurred.

Avery seized the opportunity to demonstrate he could be quite as lavish as the pining Julius.

"You four go ahead, and I'll get another machine. That'll give Ruby and me a chance to take the flowers home tonight."

Mrs. McPhee's expression questioned the propriety of entrusting her daughter to such a doubtful person; but the others overbore her.

Ruby leaned back in the taxicab and inhaled the fragrant air.

"Oh, I'm so happy," she sighed.

She really was wonderful, he told himself; so talented, so refined, so femininely delicate. He had the sudden realization he had never appreciated her.

"It's been so sweet of you to help me," the gifted girl went on. "And I liked your flowers best of all. See — I'm carrying them."

So — his mother — she who was for ever voicing Ruby's virtues to him — had done this.

"You were lovely tonight — you are, I mean."

The sensation of being alone, in this flowerful bower,

with the girl two hundred souls had been idolizing, tinged his voice with ardour.

Ruby put out her hand; he pressed it warmly, then kissed it.

A slight shiver passed through her.

"But do you really love me — love me enough?"

Whatever surprise he felt was pleased surprise. Her implied acquiescence he took as a tribute. The peculiar exhilaration of the moment urged him on. He felt oddly buoyed up by the spark-like recollection that his mother would approve. And Julius —

"With all my heart."

A faint cooing note came from her lips. She settled back and said:

"Well — but you must promise not to interfere with my career."

2

The seats Saul Sherbondy had secured proved to be in the first row, center.

"I never sit anywhere else," exclaimed the incurable celebrator of glad tidings. Hardly had the ink dried on the newspapers announcing the engagement when he telephoned Avery and insisted on taking him to the theatre the next night.

The curious aspect of their friendship was that Sherbondy, the influential, the suave, the prosperous, invariably took the initiative. Avery liked him and always felt flattered by his society; but he could not afford to reciprocate the expensive hospitality — especially now that he was under promise to marry.

Sometimes he was a little curious as to what Sherbondy could see in him.

Countless rotating electric fans could not effectively dispel the humidity of the theatre, which was almost entirely filled with midsummer pleasure-seekers. The play — given by a stock company — was a farce, "Turvy Topsy." As an engaged man, Avery felt too serious-minded to enjoy the foolery; but his companion laughed so uproariously and with such a peculiarly high-pitched sound that all the spectators in the vicinity turned toward him and themselves laughed the louder at his helpless mirth.

At the conclusion of each act, Sherbondy would applaud violently; by the expedient of cupping his hands, he could produce a veritable explosion.

"See? She's got me spotted now!" he exclaimed.

Avery observed that the leading woman, during each curtain call, looked directly down at the Milady Petticoat Company's president, and bestowed a warm smile.

"It never fails," Sherbondy averred when they had found their way to the Constantinople's gay café. "It works with the best actresses in the business. I made such a hit with Nancy Blair she asked me back after her show, and personally thanked me. They live and die for the applause they get."

Avery stared. Such naïveté in this otherwise sophisticated man of affairs was incomprehensible.

"I thought you were a woman-hater, Saul."

"My boy, each man is born to be some woman's meat, and you can't get away from it."

"Take my case." Avery grinned.

Sherbondy looked aghast. "I certainly apologize. I didn't mean it that way. Tell me how it happened."

Instead, Avery began opening his heart on a topic that was giving him considerable worry. The trust company paid him seventy-five dollars a month; increases were far apart. Ruby had been offered a small salary by Mrs. Screemer to teach at the school the next year, but she had not definitely decided to take the post. They could hardly hope to live on his present income. The easiest solution would have been to postpone the wedding; but Ruby had suggested October, and he thought it would be indelicate of him to propose a delay.

"I can't ask her to live down on Thirteenth Street, with the Dagoes," he told Sherbondy.

His friend's eyes squinted shrewdly as he pulled at his large cigar. He said:

"I've always wondered why a chap like you stuck around such a morgue."

Avery had wondered himself. He had graduated from college two years ago with no special aptitude developed, no special training undergone. His mother thought he ought to start earning money — "so's you'll learn the value of it," she said. The Fidelity Trust Company was his grandfather's executor; its officers were friendly to her. Avery made no objection when she sent him there. The job they tendered was as good as any other; it sounded well. The work itself was not tiring and not unpleasant — all very well for an irresponsible bachelor.

Sherbondy went on, easily: "How'd you like the manufacturing and selling game — have you ever considered it?"

Avery shook his head.

"I've been thinking lately I ought to take some one else in with me," his host confided. Avery became very alert. "I've got a nice little thing, all right. My net profit this year will be over five thousand dollars. The trouble with me is, I'm apt to be easily satisfied, instead of expanding."

With a demeanour of ultraseriousness, he produced a fountain pen, and began an illustrated talk on the possibilities of the petticoat business. The back of the menu-card was soon covered with figures. Avery listened with the utmost absorption.

"With another ten thousand, you see, I could double the number of machines and more than double the profits. The overhead wouldn't have to be increased very much."

"But could you sell the stuff?"

"Selling's the least of my troubles. I don't have to turn a hand to market all I can make. You can see for yourself: every well-dressed woman wears two or three silk petticoats. You'll find that out soon enough." He paused for one of his molar smiles. "Well, somebody has to make 'em."

Avery waited.

"It's a one-man affair now. There isn't a job you'd look at. But if you can get hold of ten thousand dollars, I don't know a better business chance. My investment amounts to about that figure, and the

good will's worth quite a lot. If you wanted to come in, I'd give you, say a third, or two-fifths, interest in the business, and we'd incorporate." He looked up from his figures intently.

"I don't know," Avery meditated aloud. "I haven't the money — that's certain; but I might get it."

Sherbondy relighted his cigar, and began taking an interest in his surroundings once more. "Let me know. Glad to have you see my books. Understand: I wouldn't let any one in with me I didn't like. Life's too short."

Avery could not drop the project so easily; his mind kept gnawing away on the fascinating possibility. He felt almost sure he could induce his mother to make the investment. The money would be safe. He could pay her as much interest as the trust company did, and still have a princely income left for himself.

His convivial companion paid the check, and they left the noisy restaurant. Avery stopped a moment in the hotel lobby to receive the congratulations of an acquaintance, and then discovered he was alone.

He finally found Sherbondy on the sidewalk outside, his short legs wide apart — a characteristic attitude when he was slightly intoxicated — in front of a decrepit, penny-in-the-slot weighing machine, his small shrewd eyes staring soberly at the glass-enclosed dial.

"Now, there's something that ought to make money," Avery heard him muttering.

"Drunk again!" Avery chided. He was amused at his host's stubborn disinclination to budge from the

contrivance. It was quite as well that his mother could not behold the petticoat magnate just at this minute. "I guess she wouldn't care much about putting ten thousand dollars into his business," he reflected grimly.

Agatha vetoed the proposal the next morning, regardless.

"I'm getting old," she said, "and I'm sure of having enough to live on, the way things are. I am not in any position to take chances."

Secretly, he accused her of utter ingratitude. Hadn't he proposed to the girl she wanted him to? Yet now, with his bridges burned behind him, she was cutting him off, without any good reason, from the certainty of a comfortable married life.

"I'd rather help you out on your expenses each month," she suggested.

Mere hateful charity! He'd rather starve than take a penny, and he said so.

"Besides," she went on, after his onslaughts had weakened her first position, "I couldn't let you have the money, even if I thought it best. I only have the use of the estate. The trust company wouldn't turn ten thousand dollars over to me."

He had been expecting this argument. His voice took on a patient, reasoning intonation.

"You don't understand, mother. Listen: Grandpa's estate all goes to Winifred and me, when — ultimately, doesn't it? Well, if I asked for my share now, and you were willing, too, they'd have to do as we said. They're just using our money to make a profit with,

themselves. I guess I know. It won't do any harm to ask them and find out, will it? "

To his angry amazement, his superior, the anaemic-faced trust officer of the Fidelity Trust Company, refused point-blank:

"I don't know anything about this petticoat proposition, Zell; it may be all right; but we can't disregard the plain provisions of Mr. Holmes' will. That's just why trust companies exist: to see that a man's property is disposed of exactly as he prescribes."

"But couldn't you invest the money in the business, instead of bonds, if we want you to? "

The tight lips seemed to smile sardonically.

"Stocks in petticoat manufacturing companies are not yet recognized as proper securities for the funds of widows. You ought to know that by this time."

This vulture perhaps thought, by refusing to disgorge, he could keep his invaluable Fourth Assistant chained down to a desk, permanently, at seventy-five dollars a month! The whole affair was quite clearly a conspiracy to frustrate the threatened loss of his services.

"If that's what you're up to," Avery said to himself, "we'll just see! "

3

"I suppose we ought to have children," Ruby said, without enthusiasm.

She was sitting on his knees after a long demonstration of affection that almost cloyed him. The acetylene jets in the McPhee parlour burned low; the window

shades were down. The clock on the mantel-piece had lately struck eleven. Mrs. McPhee long since had gone upstairs; Margaret still lingered at the Masonic Labour Day dance. His suitcase stood in the hallway; before long he must start for the depot.

He was slightly taken aback by her abrupt change of demeanour. "I presume so," he answered.

His fiancée went on, with the air of one who faces a disagreeable subject resolutely:

"It's too bad there has to be any physical side to marriage." She surveyed him directly. "But you shall have your rights, Avery."

"My 'rights'!" He felt like laughing at her. "Why, I don't want any 'rights'."

Her expression of determined martyrdom persisted. He began feeling uncomfortable. What a queer girl she was! Where on earth had she picked up these feudal ideas?

"Avery, tell me — shall I be the first?"

So startled was he that his mind seemed paralysed. Doubtless she had the right to ask the question. Out of his inward turmoil presently emerged one definite voice: he must not lie to her.

"No."

Ruby stood up quickly, and moved to a near-by chair.

"Tell me." She was gravely inquisitorial.

She wanted particulars — names and dates, almost.

"I can't do that, Ruby." He was willing to suffer for his past sins, but there must be some limit to the prodding. "I haven't lied to you — you know all

you need to know. What would be the use of going into details?"

"Oh, Avery!" she cried. "And you would have married me without saying a word."

He was growing a little irritated under her continued demands.

"What's the good? I'm willing to tell anything, if I can only see the reason."

"I think I have the right, and the duty," she vindicated herself. "Especially, considering your father."

It was an incisive thrust — one that hurt.

"Well, Ruby," he said quietly, after a moment, "you have all the important facts, and you know about my inheritance. I don't think I'll tell you any more than I have. Maybe you'd better consider yourself released. I won't blame you — won't have any hard feelings."

She bit her lips. "No, I don't want to do that, but — oh, Avery how could you have!" She wept a little.

"I'm just as sorry as you." He was aware of a great sadness. "Let's try to forget it."

Both of them remained disconsolate, nevertheless. At last it was time for him to go.

"Here's that book you loaned me." She handed him a copy of "Tono Bungay."

His face lighted up with remembered pleasure. "How'd you like it?"

She smiled queerly. "Oh — I think it's kind of funny. Not very refined. I don't believe a book like that does much good in the world."

Their divergence in tastes continued to trouble him, after he had kissed her good-bye and was on his way toward the railway station. Vague misgivings stirred to life. He bent his head and scowled. Years before, he had taken a solemn resolve that — no matter what else might befall — he would never duplicate the tragedy of his father and mother; his marriage should be brightly successful. And now had come this sudden unconsidered betrothal to Ruby. A "nice" girl, talented, the soul of purity; yes — he grimaced — even "refined." His mother was satisfied; she had told him Ruby would make him a splendid wife. Everybody, in fact, seemed pleased except Mrs. McPhee, and possibly, his sister.

He happened to be passing Bryant's block of stores at the moment. The sign in the window of the shop opposite read:

"Julius Nightingale — Bryant's Reliable Jeweller."

The haunt of his vanquished rival. Mrs. McPhee still talked incessantly about Julius — he was inconsolable over Ruby's engagement; a fine, steady, prosperous fellow — and "smart as a whip." Yet her daughter had turned him down for a youth without money or prospects: such trains of dismal thought Mrs. McPhee made little effort to conceal.

Avery found the lower berth reserved for him on the midnight sleeper pre-empted by a snoring woman. Week-enders returning to the city occupied all the other berths, and he walked sourly forward to the day-coach. He could not have slept much, anyway.

This "Tono Bungay" business was so typical. Her

whole mental outlook was so different. He remembered writing her a fanciful, whimsical letter earlier in the summer — and her reply: "What was the matter with you when you wrote me that last one? It sounded so queer." She had no sense of humour at all, no lightness of touch, no gaiety of mood. Deadly seriousness pervaded her. She would talk portentously about that career of hers, about the wedding details, about her ideas for their home.

Another discovery that discomfited him was that she had no ear for music. People said she played the piano "beautifully." Her repertoire, he discovered, consisted of a couple of pieces she had painstakingly learned years before; even these she played badly, with a slurring over of the difficult spots. It shocked him profoundly that she was pathetically unaware of in-harmonious bass notes. They tried a few of his songs, but her accompaniments were atrocious. She had a fondness, in music, as in the other arts, for the sugar-sweet. To her, Amy Woodford Finden's "Indian Love Lyrics" represented the high tide of musical composition.

Avery doubled up on the leather seat of the day-coach, and tried in vain to go to sleep. Ruby did seem inexpressive. He had never heard her say anything really original and interesting. Perhaps she didn't have the faculty of putting her thoughts into words. A chance remark of hers came back to him: "Sometimes I lie awake all night — just thinking."

She was a splendid girl, without doubt. And she was willing to marry him — the son of a good-for-

nothing rounder; to take her chances with him — instead of marrying the provident Julius. There must be some spirit in her. She must love him a great deal. Probably he was unworthy of her.

But did he love her? Once more he started wearily on the same thought-circle. His fatigue-poisoned mind was like a hawk — pouncing down upon incidents long forgotten; like a lean mongrel — digging up the bones of old prejudices and obsessions long buried.

He would have been sufficiently worn and dejected next morning, without finding on his desk a warm letter of congratulation from Inez Copeland.

4

It came as a surprise to Avery that his sister should prove the hit of the show. The fact was assured, though: people all around him, who had thus far been politely bored by "Professor Jumbo," began to laugh with Winifred's first grotesque appearance; before long, they howled.

"Say — she's good!" a man behind him said.

None the less, the spectacle produced some indefinable, deep-seated pain in him. One does not enjoy seeing one's own sister exaggerating her natural homeliness in order to make people laugh. There is something unwholesome about it — like watching an armless man drive nails with a hammer held in his toes, for example — or listening to a performance by mid-gets. Winifred was getting all her effects, in the part of the old-maid school-teacher, by droll accentuations of the ugliness of her nose and mouth. She was a

ludicrous figure, amusing, yet — to Avery, anyway — pathetic.

He detested these amateur musical comedies by this time. His mother, in bed with rheumatism, had had to plead with him to go to this one.

"It'll please Winifred so — and you know, you have only a couple of weeks left with us."

"What on earth did she want to go and join that fool bunch for?" he retorted. He remembered the Northwestern Five Hundred Club — really, the nucleus of the Northwestern Opera Association, the producer of "Professor Jumbo."

But he went. With him sat Alfred Lucius; later they would join Saul Sherbondy at the Constantinople.

Winifred's greatest opportunity came in the last act, with the song: "I Found I'd Lost Another Chance to be a Bride."

"She's really a scream," Lucius commented. "I never thought she had it in her, she's always been so quiet."

Undeniably, Winifred was funny. She had devised a ridiculous way of swooping from one note to another, that gave just the proper effect of melancholy. She repeated the chorus four times. Still Avery was not genuinely pleased.

All of the other singers were execrable.

"You're ten times as good as that fellow," Lucius commented.

Avery regarded the baritone on the stage with professional contempt. A strange longing passed through him. He wished it were he singing the song, foolish

as it was. Imaginatively he sensed the thrill of self-expression. This mood quickly gave place to poignant regret for his own musical career so unpleasantly terminated. Leonard Dauchy's curt note had been a surgeon's knife lopping off his ambition; he had sung scarcely a note since.

The sun of Sherbondy's joyous smile of welcome evaporated his gloomy thoughts the instant Lucius and he entered the Constantinople's blatant precincts. What an exuberant, radiating personality! By comparison, Avery always felt like a puny, whining weakling. Sherbondy was strong, undismayed, resourceful. He had an inexhaustible faith in himself; he never doubted: whereas self-distrust, self-questioning, was for ever burrowing into and undermining Avery's attitude toward life. A week dragged by, for example, before he could bring himself to confess his failure to secure the required capital for investment in the Milady Petticoat Company; but Sherbondy, after saying he was sorry, at once dismissed the subject. That was the secret of the man: he didn't mope; he couldn't worry; depressing news slid from his consciousness, leaving no erosion.

"Look who's here!"

Avery followed Lucius' interested inspection, and beheld a large party of young people streaming into the café.

The fat youth identified them first:

"Why, it's the bunch from 'Professor Jumbo'!"

Winifred came into view at the rear of the procession. She looked about the seething café a little tim-

idly — much as her brother had done, only a year ago. The group of performers, relieved from their tremendous responsibilities, moved exuberantly, volubly, to a cluster of reserved tables in a corner.

"This is no place for her." He was conscious of a slight renewal of irritation.

From where he sat, across the room, he could see his sister. She was saying something; the others at her table listened attentively; suddenly they laughed, with an explosiveness that carried across to him, even above the intervening tumult. Winifred had been the star of the performance; her success still enveloped her; she was having a good time, and he need feel no brotherly worry.

Sherbondy was disposed to be facetious over the forthcoming ceremony.

"Drink deep, my son, while you're yet a free man. Two weeks more, and the doors will clang shut behind you."

He was a little tipsy already. Avery knew that underneath his bantering lay a very deep grudge against holy wedlock — so firmly rooted, in fact, that he had refused to have anything to do with the approaching event.

"Nothing doing, old man!" he had evaded. "I'll serve as your pall-bearer any time — gladly — but as your best man, never! Get Lucius."

The orchestra began a tango.

"Already you're a slave," Sherbondy gibed. "I'm going to pick out the prettiest girl in the room, and dance with her, and Lucius can do the same. But

you'll sit here alone. You wouldn't dare dance with any one."

He bowed himself off and found a partner. Lucius grew restive, and presently did likewise.

Avery's air of complete poise did his new sophistication great credit, especially in the light of the fact that he was inwardly rebelling against the truth in Sherbondy's words. He really dared dance, of course, with any person he chose; but if he did so, he would not be doing the "right thing." If Ruby heard of it, she would think he had wronged her. She had told him, with virtuous pride, of having cut off all social intercourse with Julius, from the moment of the engagement. No, the conventions already had him in their grip.

He might, with propriety, dance with Winifred. Without gusto he looked in her direction. His sister sat, quite alone, in an area of deserted tables. Her companions had laughed at her buffooning, had vied with one another in acclaiming her the "hit of the show"—until the music started up; then, with the ineffable cruelty of youth, they had gone off to the dance-floor, two by two, and left her alone—forlornly, conspicuously alone. She was just a homely girl again.

A shock of pity and wrath sickened Avery's heart.

He arose and threaded his way, between tables, across the floor. Winifred did not observe him until he stood at her side.

His strong emotion gave him vision. It was as if he were really seeing his sister for the first time in his life. Till now, he had always taken her for granted. He

looked at her innumerable times each day; but tonight, as he stood scanning the mechanical, brave smile on her face, he discerned and subtly realized her. His was one of those rare, blessed moments of almost perfect comprehension.

A quick tactfulness proffered him aid.

"I'm dying to dance," he explained.

He had not deceived her at all, he perceived, and felt a second's apprehension she intended playing the martyr and telling him not to bother about her.

She made as if to acquiesce, then changed her mind.

"Let's just sit and talk."

Her voice held a quality of resignation. He sat down beside her, as much surprised as he had been in the theatre, by that revelation of a vivid, magnetic, unsuspected something in her, seeking vent. All at once, his anger at the incredible boorishness of her companions yielded to an emotion of penitent regret. Where they had wounded her once, he himself had hurt her hundreds of times by his belittlings, his sarcasms, his unspoken contempts.

His humility, her relief in his presence, drew them together. An unaffected naturalness banished the customary antagonism between them. A new, mutual appreciation lent a magnified value to their words.

"Honestly, you were great tonight, Winifred." He might have been trying to please some new, alluring girl.

"It was fun." She continued to smile faintly. "In a way. But I'm not going to do it again."

"Why not?"

She spoke very passively. "I don't like that kind of a part, and yet it's all I can do. You can see that."

He was silent — suffering vicariously all the disappointment that must be her constant fate; all the blind, hopeless revolt against the mere accident of unloveliness.

He felt her gaze.

"Only a few days more."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," he twitted her.

"Well, I don't see how I could. You can't possibly know how I dread the whole business. Don't you see yourself what a wretched mistake you're making?"

He felt he should protest. "Now, Winifred —"

The music had stopped, and the dancers began re-entering the café.

She gave a despairing gesture. "We can't talk here."

"Let's clear out," he said. He too wanted to prolong this new comradeship.

He had never felt so close to another human soul. They walked side by side, aimlessly, in the rain that had set in. Through the contact of her hand lightly pressed upon his arm, he sensed the stimulus of her deep affection.

"If you only knew — if I could only make you understand — how unusual you are, how much you can look forward to. You have such wonderful possibilities."

He pretended to laugh. "That's a habit all sisters

have — overestimating their brothers." Yet her appreciation filled him with happiness.

"No — no! I'm serious. But it'll all go for nothing if you marry Ruby. I haven't anything against her. She's all right in her way. Only she's not up to you. She's not in the same class."

This time he made no protest. He was beginning to relapse into his mood of uncertainty, of disquiet.

"You must realize all this by now," urged that distressed voice at his side. "You aren't dreaming still. You can't help knowing what I say is true. I can tell you're unhappy."

They had reached the apartment house, but they walked on slowly.

"What's the good of all this, Win?" Avery burst out. "What if it is true?"

She turned toward him impatiently. "What's the good? Why, just simply cut it, that's all! Ditch the whole affair!"

"I couldn't do that," he groaned.

"Why not? It'll hurt a lot right now, but it'll prevent a thousand times worse hurt later on. You couldn't make Ruby happy for long."

They turned in toward the lighted entrance.

"Oh, please, Avery!" Winifred importuned.

A preoccupied wonder arrested his faculties, that he had never observed her eyes before. They were so expressive, just now, of pride and affection. The long eye-lashes softened them into unmistakable loveliness; on their lids, her tears welled up and glistened. That curse of a nose and mouth escaped him.

He put his arm about her and kissed her.

"Bless you," he said.

But he knew he had not the courage to do as she pleaded.

5

The front door now opened and closed continuously. The bridegroom, from his refuge in Mrs. McPhee's room, could hear foot-falls and subdued voices on the staircase and along the hall, as the invited guests made their way to the two front bedrooms to deposit their wraps. From the floor below ascended faintly the notes of a harp, in tinkling arpeggios. The McPhee house had all at once taken on the muffled, awesome atmosphere of a sacred temple.

Avery resorted to his watch still again; only fifteen minutes had passed since the mantel-piece clock chimed eight o'clock. A dim restlessness oppressed him. It seemed as if he were taking the pulse of a slowly dying world. All he could do was to sit and stare at the floor — and wait.

Margaret McPhee's room, next door, was dedicated to the display of the wedding presents. He could hear the people passing in and out; occasionally the separating wall yielded scarcely audible exclamations of feminine rapture. The gifts did seem lavish — from the innumerable napkin-rings, and the enormous cut-glass water pitcher from the legendary Mr. Nightingale — "You might know Julius would do the handsome thing," Mrs. McPhee had said — to the chest of silver from Agatha Zell.

And his mother was not there to behold the consummation she had so long schemed to encompass. Her rheumatism seemed worse; yet her physician had kept her in bed only by the direst threats. Avery wanted the wedding postponed, but she would have none of it.

He felt a little forlorn. Winifred was not at hand either. She too pleaded a last moment illness; but both of them knew she was malingering. He cherished sullen resentment toward her.

"She might have been a better sport about it," he muttered, replacing his watch in his vest pocket.

The door opened and the cheerful, infantile countenance of Alfred Lucius came into view.

"Hello! All ready for the scaffold?"

Avery was disposed to be pettish. "Where've you been? You're a slick best man."

Lucius manipulated his comedian's face into a caricature of penitence.

"Been helping Margaret in the kitchen. Say, she's a devil! Pep to burn."

"Close the door," bade the bridegroom sharply.

The fat youth refused to be soured. "Yep — some girl! Now, let's have a look at you. All dolled up?" He fumbled in his pockets. "Let's see. Here's the ring — and here's the minister's rake-off."

Some one rapped.

"All set?" asked Lucius.

Their summoner had disappeared. The hall and stairs were deserted. Low, reverential voices still

arose from the floor below — and those fateful, staccato harp-notes.

Avery had one last pitiful impulse to dash out of the house — to freedom!

They crept down the back staircase, through the kitchen and dining-room, and into the hall area. The minister, an undersized individual with light sandy hair, greeted Avery with patient, timid eyes and a determinedly helpful smile. The harpist, a pale, sharp-featured girl, stared out at them from behind her barricade of oak branches — yet never missed a note.

A slight hissing noise came from above. They discerned Mrs. McPhee hanging over the balustrade. She was mouthing unspoken words with great agitation; her lips worked grotesquely.

The Reverend Aldro Doble nodded his comprehension.

“Left foot first,” he whispered to Avery.

The moment had arrived. The clergyman and the bridegroom had practised this stately entrance conscientiously. They advanced with marvellous precision into the parlour, Alfred Lucius immediately in the rear. Instead of walking quickly and easily into place, the trio must proceed at this snail's pace. Each step seemed an eternity.

The blazing acetylene jets diffused a ghastly light upon the solemn visages that turned toward them. Lucius and Avery were the only men in evening dress. Hoary frock-coats and “store clothes” bedecked the others; the older women ran to black silk, the younger to white organdy. All stared and stared, it seemed to

the bridegroom, with unapologetic curiosity. His outstanding sensation had to do with the heavy, funereal aspect of the affair. The redolence of flowers carried out the illusion. The men's dull eyes expressed infinite sadness, and one or two women made ready their handkerchiefs.

"This is all a scream," Avery was thinking. Yet the mournful contagion gripped him cataleptically. His face bore a set rigid look. He continued to creep forward as if in a trance.

At last they reached the empty fire-place, and about-faced. Avery experienced a lightening of the tension. All eyes were now fixed upon the stairway in the hall.

The harp swelled suddenly into a wedding march. Avery caught sight of the hem of a white skirt on the stairs; and with the prevailing stately gravity, Margaret McPhee descended into view. Then his bride. She looked very pale as she came toward him. Margaret, the irrepressible, maintained a humorous eye; but Ruby needed no confirmation from the onlookers to bring home to her the awful solemnity of the ceremony. If her steps failed, however infinitesimally, to synchronize with her maid of honour's, she would account it an unforgettable tragedy. Her lips, withal, wore a waxen smile; her eyes looked unfamiliar, shorn of their customary glasses.

The ceremony proceeded briskly then. Ruby had considered it behooved her, as one of the Moderns, to raise the issue of the word, "obey." Her mother and the minister stood out for the good, old-fashioned promise. Avery professed indifference.

"Oh, go on, Rube," Margaret had ultimately solved the dilemma by urging. "You can cross your fingers when you say it."

So here she was, indenturing herself as his chattel for life.

It was a relief, anyway, to have his back to the light. The minister's forehead perspired. Avery felt sorry for him; he was trying so hard to put an earnest quaver into his voice, and in general, to live up to the occasion.

"I now pronounce you — man and wife."

The happy pair stood irresolute an instant.

"All over now," Avery thought.

"Kiss me!" he heard his wife whisper urgently.

He realized he had nearly spoiled everything.

The minister was shaking hands with them. "Let me be the first to congratulate you." A quality of relief, of facetiousness, coloured his voice.

The funereal aspect vanished magically. People began crowding around Ruby and kissing her — the younger men with many a premonitory joke. Avery spied Mrs. McPhee near the doorway, dabbing her wet eyes — still inconsolable.

"Well, Julius!" he heard Ruby saying, and turned quickly to scrutinize his quondam rival.

Instead of beholding, as he expected, a flashing, dashing paragon of pulchritude and virtue, he found himself looking down upon a shrivelled little person of about fifty. Mr. Nightingale carried a shrewd eye, a long pointed nose, and a general expression of small-town acumen. But he was an old man! — and ugly!

His face was impleached with a thousand wrinkles; his lower lip protruded incredibly — like the spout of a pump — with a fixed conviction of unassailable prudence.

"Pleased for to meet you," he assured his more fortunate competitor, with perfect magnanimity.

Such was Mrs. McPhee's stalking-horse. Avery suffered a severe shrinkage of his remainder of complacency. A girl is inevitably measured by the quality of the men who seek her; the fact that Ruby had tolerated this gawk as a suitor, gave him a sudden discernment of her relative desirability.

The worst of it was the way Julius kept grinning at him — his queer lower lip hanging down, his breath coming and going through his unprepossessing teeth with an abhorrent bubbling noise. He might at least have had the decency to appear heartbroken.

"He's a piece of meat," quoth Avery savagely to himself.

There was a rush of guests to the dining room — a wild scramble to secure seats at the first table. Bride and groom sat at the head of the board. The atmosphere became suddenly that of baked-meats. Jokes he considered stupid were propelled in his direction. The physical flavour of men and women gorging food repelled him. Where was the delicacy, the fine sentiment of it all, he besought himself.

"Well, you're married now," their looks and words seem to say. "This woman and you are to live intimately together the remainder of your days. It's a vulgar fact, but why be squeamish?"

The banqueters yielded loathfully to the pressure of the hungry eyes that stared at them from the parlour. A pell-mell stampede for the vacated chairs pushed Avery and Alfred Lucius out into the hallway.

"Say, have you seen that simp following me around?" The best man gurgled with laughter.

"Who?"

"The Rev. Aldro. He's afraid I'll forget his fee."

On the instant, the minister appeared from the parlour.

"I've had hardly a word with you all evening," he beamed.

Lucius at once returned to the parlour, followed by the anxious eyes of the clergyman. He excused himself in a moment, and strode back into the parlour, with a kind of desperateness.

"Poor devil!" thought Avery. "I presume he's depending on my ten dollars to buy his family bread."

He sauntered listlessly into the parlour, in time to see the minister still pursuing Lucius from group to group. He himself was distinctly conscious of his negligibility. People clustered around Ruby, but he was left to himself. In the dining-room, the guests still crammed cold mutton down their gullets, their eyes distended; he caught a glimpse of the lady harpist wolfing food.

The whole effect was so shockingly fleshly.

He felt a finger — a prehensile finger — on his shoulder. Mrs. McPhee, like a summoning Fate, fixed him with stern eye.

"Time for you to go upstairs now," she stated.
"You'll find your things in Ruby's room."

In Ruby's room! He had left his change of clothing in Mrs. McPhee's chamber.

He knocked timidly at the door.

"Come in," said his wife.

She was standing in front of the bureau, partly dressed in her travelling suit.

The conventions of Bryant demanded — the ceremony once over — the forgetting of all foolish fastidiousness. Man and wife must live together thickly; the sooner they got used to being herded into one small room, the better.

He stood in the doorway, his innate delicacy painfully mangled. This was Ruby's idea of "culture"!

Downstairs, the gathering laughed and ate.

"Here's the rice!" he heard Julius Nightingale cackle.

His wife looked around.

"We'll have to hurry," she said, her fingers in her hair. "Your things are over in the corner."

Chapter Three: Avery, Junior

I

THE stenographer suggested that he wait.

"He ought to be back any minute," she said.

Avery sat down and looked around. The office of the Milady Petticoat Company frankly disappointed him by its bareness. The business environment of so remarkable a person as Saul Sherbondy ought to have been more magnificent. Instead, one stepped directly from the corridor of the loft-building into the untidy enclosure of painted floor, painted walls and painted ceiling. Card-board boxes lay scattered about in disorder; in one corner stood several large wooden shipping cases, grimy with stencilled addresses. Sherbondy had no privacy at all. His ancient oak roll-top desk crouched to the right of the door as if expecting momentarily to be ejected. The typewriter desk had a similarly alien look — and the very old letter press and filing case.

On the grey wall opposite — partly concealing a loitering crack in the plaster — hung a large lithograph, about six feet by four, representing a décolleté young woman smilingly examining her flaring, plum-coloured petticoat. Along the side and bottom of this work of art appeared the slogan:

MILADY PETTICOATS

"More Stitches to the Inch"

To the left, a board partition kept at bay what was doubtless the manufacturing room. A woman in working clothes entered through a door in the partition; a chattering babel of machines swept into the office.

Such sprawling slovenliness slightly intimidated Avery. He was not accustomed to it. The trust company offices were restful oases of mahogany furniture and thick green rugs. Papers were not allowed to lie in haphazard heaps on desk or floor; a meticulous filing system swept them out of sight within twenty-four hours. And noise? Trust company officials conversed almost in whispers; they fairly tip-toed about in the vault-like silence.

Vigorous footsteps in the corridors punctuated the din within, and the president of the Milady Petticoat Company entered the boundaries of his principality.

"Hello, Avery!" He initiated one of his extraordinary smiles, but checked it, with a sudden afterthought. He retained his caller's hand and looked up at him sympathetically. "Say, old man! I was awfully, awfully sorry to hear about your mother. Sudden, wasn't it?"

"No, she'd been ill for six months."

"What was the trouble?"

"Endocarditis." Avery felt a little discomposed. The fact was, he had come directly from the cemetery to his friend's office. Involuntarily he was devising self-justifications for his haste. "But those things are

a great shock, no matter how much warning you have."

"Of course." Sherbondy unlocked and rolled up his desk-top. "Sit down." He scrutinized a couple of memoranda, then turned around.

Avery began:

"I wanted to know whether that offer of yours was still open. I mean, about putting capital into the business."

"Oh, yes!" recollected Sherbondy, all attention. "I hadn't thought any more about it, to tell the truth," he went on very deliberately.

"I have the money now," his visitor pursued anxiously, "and I'm going to make a change of some sort. There's nothing for me at the trust company."

"Right — perfectly right. Well, now, I'll answer you this way: The offer is still open, in a general way; but I'd want to think over the exact terms a bit." He threw a meaning glance at the stenographer, who withdrew to the opposite end of the room. "Say — just what did I tell you that night?"

"You said for ten thousand dollars you'd give me a one-third share of the business."

"Hm." Sherbondy rocked back and forward in his swivel chair, his finger tips together, occasionally glancing out of the window with an expression of profound weightiness. "How much do you want to put in?"

"About ten thousand, I guess."

The petticoat manufacturer checked his oscillations, and hypnotized Avery with a gaze of slowly awakening inspiration. "Say — I got it. We'll incorporate.

I'll put in my business for fifteen thousand — and that's conservative! You put in fifteen thousand cash. Half and half!"

Avery hesitated. He found it difficult to quench the enthusiasm on his friend's face. But fifteen thousand was too much. He couldn't afford it. He had just seen the trust company's records of his grandfather's estate; and instead of the fifty thousand dollars he had counted on, the actual figures approximated thirty thousand — one-half his, and one-half Winifred's. His mother had drawn out her bonus of a thousand dollars every year since Mrs. Holmes' death.

He felt it unwise to invest the whole of his legacy in even so secure an enterprise as the Milady Petticoat Company.

He faltered: "I'd only planned on ten thousand —" Sherbondy's omniscient eyes were upon him.

The idea came that Winifred would probably jump at the chance of buying five thousand dollars' worth of stock.

"— but this proposition sounds even better," he picked up momentum.

"All right — it's a go!" Saul Sherbondy held out his thick, soft hand in token of the bargain. "When do you want to close?"

"About a week?"

"Fine!" His radiant smile brightened the office. "I'll have my lawyer get busy on the incorporation papers. Believe me, Avery, you're getting one grand opportunity."

He extracted a red-backed book from a lower drawer.

"Here's my ledger. You'll want to look it over very carefully, for your own protection."

2

By the exercise of a great deal of mental suggestion, Alfred Lucius was finally influenced to take unwilling leave at eleven o'clock.

"I kept talking about the hard trip we'd had," Mrs. McPhee dilated, "but he wouldn't take the hint till I yawned in his face."

Margaret McPhee, who had accompanied her mother and Ruby to the city for a few days' visit, appeared Lucius' sole defender.

"You were positively rude to him, mamma," she interposed.

"How could she help being?" demanded Ruby, wearily. "Why you let him hang around you, Meg, is more than I can see. He's simply impossible."

"Oh, Alfred's all right," Avery put in with a masculine air of settling the whole affair.

His mother-in-law trod heavily toward the rear of the new apartment, but checked herself and turned around once more. "His father's quite well-to-do — isn't he, Avery?" she asked, with a casualness that deceived none of them.

Avery and Margaret burst into open-mouthed laughter.

"I don't see the joke," sniffed Ruby. She and her

mother looked slightly nettled. The two were close mental affinities: they laughed together, and were heavily solemn together. Avery and his volatile young sister-in-law, conversely, seemed to think and feel alike. A score of times every hour — on the slightest pretext — this cleavage of viewpoint and temperament came to the surface.

"I'm going to bed," Mrs. McPhee proclaimed. She seemed to take for granted her freedom of movement in the apartment — much as if it were she, instead of her son-in-law, who paid the rent. Avery was even more ruffled by her air of slight condescension toward the new abode; Ruby and he, a month after Mrs. Zell's death in the spring, had cast off the suite of three small rooms that had housed them the first half-year of their married life, and progressed to the upper floor of this new and comparatively spacious duplex in the western part of the city. He himself felt enormously proud of the place — its seven rooms, its fine new furniture, its fashionable location. He liked to hear visitors enthuse over its allurements. It was by far the most attractive home he had ever known. The McPhee house looked down-at-the-heel in comparison. But did his aggressive mother-in-law give the slightest expression of pleasure, of delighted appreciation? She did not. She walked into the place as if she owned it, gave it one glance of easy assumption, quite as though her daughter had a right to expect such comfort as a matter of course. Her one comment was negative:

"My! I don't see how you ever stood that other place, Ruby."

She still exuded toward Avery her old air of mute accusation — perhaps for his unhorsing the faithful Julius. Even at this instant, she put her arms about his wife and regarded her searchingly.

"You look frightfully tired, darling," she said, and turned toward Avery with one of those strange looks of hers. A look that seemed to put the guilt of Ruby's fatigue upon his shoulders. Ruby did look tired. She was very pale, and the flesh of her cheeks sagged down so far that her dark eyes seemed round and bulging. He was anxious about her himself. He had heard enough of the weird vicissitudes of pregnancy to be frightened by her slightest complaint. But it wasn't his fault she was tired. He hadn't even seen her for a fortnight; it was at his suggestion, indeed, that she had gone back to Bryant for a rest and a change. If the railroad trip had been too much for her — why blame him?

"She mustn't have anything disturb her rest tonight — ought to sleep late tomorrow morning."

Confound this bustling old nuisance, anyway!

"Oh, don't mind me!" he felt like withering her. "I'm digging up the money to keep this ranch going — but don't mind me! I'm only a husband. I'll sleep out here in the front room — under the davenport!"

It was Margaret's crisp voice that cut through this welter of maternal protectiveness.

"Do come along, mamma! You started five minutes ago."

Mrs. McPhee impaled her younger daughter's piquant features with a shaft-like glance.

"Well!" she exploded indignantly. "It's a funny thing —" Margaret's airy unconcern was too much for her. She could not fathom this strange offspring of hers.

Avery sighed. It was a tremendous relief to be left alone with his wife. He had missed her — much more than he anticipated.

"Poor darling!" he intoned tenderly, stroking her hair. "I'm sorry you're tired."

Her exhausted brain was so full of details she could not react to his affection. She terminated his kiss to inquire:

"Is the milk-card out?"

Their bedroom, its windows wide open, seemed oppressively close. From the street, an arc lamp cast a curious, speckled light on the wall. Ruby tossed and turned into eventual slumber; from his bed he could catch her regular inhalations.

But he himself remained wide awake. His mind reverted ceaselessly to the injustice of Mrs. McPhee's inferences. A multitude of caustic retorts came to his lips. The new business venture worried him, too. "You'll never be a business man," some mocking aspect of himself whispered. "You ought to have gone into a profession. You haven't enough brass. And that partner of yours!" Not that he liked Saul Sherbondy any less! But their daily contact, magnifying the warp and woof of his friend's character, necessarily betrayed a few flaws. Saul's business habits were atrocious. There were whole days when he did not even appear at the new office.

"Well, he's a prince — and absolutely honest," Avery's conscious self seemed to say.

"Very likely," yielded this other, submerged, apprehensive entity. "Those brand-new machines are great stuff, but — how about those decreased sales?"

They were at each other's throats, these two, suddenly divided, parts of himself — straining back and forth across his fatigued imagination.

The bell in the tower of the fire-engine house two blocks east struck one. Avery groaned.

"What if anything happened to that five thousand dollars your sister put in?" demanded Apprehension.

The figure under the white sheet on the bed opposite stirred, then duplicated his own outcry.

The phantom wrestlers whisked off the stage. "What is it, darling?" he asked softly.

"Pain."

He had heard the word from her before. Women were delicate complex mechanisms, he knew by now, full of odd incomprehensible discomforts. But her intonation brought him to a posture of extreme intentness, his legs over the side of the bed.

"The jolting of the train," she said.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he pleaded. "Anything I can get?" He slipped his feet into his bedroom slippers.

She yielded an exclamation of distress, then said:

"I'd give anything for a glass of ice-cream soda."

Avery sat back, bewildered. The doctor, Mrs. McPhee — the whole world, in fact — had told him a pregnant wife must needs be humoured — at all costs;

and he felt quite ready to go to extreme lengths to satisfy such vagaries. But this!

"But darling, at this time of night?" he demanded haltingly.

Ruby's petulant little cry conveyed worlds of reproach. "I just suggested it — you asked me — and now you've lost your temper!"

One cannot argue with a sick wife. Avery got into his clothes, as fast as he could in the darkness. It seemed entirely natural, by now, to dress and undress in the same room with Ruby. After the first day or two, she and he had lived together in unreserved intimacy with complete matter-of-factness.

His lips found her forehead wet.

"Shall I wake your mother?"

She rolled her head negatively. "I can call her if it gets any worse. She's tired."

Outside, in the motionless, cloudy, June night, he proceeded uncertainly to the nearest drug store.

This marriage business was a peculiar affair. He was conscious of a thousand interlaceries of relationship between the two of them. The adjustment was so extremely delicate, the problem of maintaining a real balance of power so incredibly difficult. He sometimes believed he must either crush Ruby or be crushed by her. In the moments of his finest considerateness for her, he always felt strangely overborne.

Really, it was not the superficial irritations that galled him, he told himself — not her habits of chewing with her mouth open, of bursting into tears inexplicably, of considering herself wholly right in all their

controversies, of talking volubly and incessantly to him when he was most tired. She had shown him counterbalancing qualities: she was conscientious; she made him comfortable; she was efficient — she amazed him by keeping an accurate household budget-book; best of all, she had accepted the inconveniences of their first months without a complaint.

No, he didn't blame Ruby. Rather, it was the fault of the incomprehensible institution of marriage.

The corner drug store was closed; he knew it would be. After a half hour's wait, he caught an "owl" street-car down-town.

"What flavour?" demanded the sleepy, surly clerk at the sixth store he visited.

Avery's mouth opened in perplexity. He had forgotten to ask.

The drug clerk eyed him contemptuously.

"Chocolate," Avery said faintly.

Fifteen minutes afterwards, his taxicab was picking up speed; and he, bearing the precious beverage — looking somewhat wilted by now — was unlocking the front door.

The whole house seemed alight. He found the doctor and Mrs. McPhee over the moaning Ruby. They turned toward him, and their eyes, with one accord, fastened blankly upon the chocolate ice-cream soda.

"She's had a miscarriage," said his mother-in-law.

3

Ordinarily, Avery grew thin in summer; in winter, his figure perceptibly rounded out. But this January

afternoon, as he sat in the office of the Milady Petticoat Company, gloomily keeping the minutes of the annual stockholders' and directors' meetings, his face seemed attenuated to a startling degree. Cheek-bones overhung the concavity of his cheeks. His blue eyes, usually limpid and ingenuous, were replete with exhaustion and anxiety. To raise them from the pad of scratch-paper to his sister's grave countenance required a definite effort of the will.

"I can't quite understand why the demand should drop off to zero so suddenly," she said. Her tone was quiet and carried no sting.

Avery shifted his glance to the corporation's president. Saul Sherbondy's sun-like visage was clouded with an unmistakably genuine distress. At the moment, his circular head was incongruously framed by the lithograph of the young female in dishabille, entrancedly bending over her plum-coloured petticoat. Just now, she seemed to be pronouncing grateful benediction over the greying ringlets of the rotund little man who had made her delight possible.

"Miss Zell," he answered regretfully, "I can't explain it any easier than you. A year ago, I could have written a hundred thousand dollars' worth of orders without leaving the office. Now I can't sell a thousand dollars' a month. It's just hard luck you and Avery came in when you did. I couldn't tell this situation was coming."

Avery's intuition had long since acquitted his friend of all blame. The post-mortem was for Winifred's benefit exclusively; he wanted to assuage his own feel-

ing of guilt for having persuaded her to invest her money.

"Just a sudden change in the fashion, wasn't it?" he intervened helpfully.

Sherbondy nodded. "Your sister probably knows more about how women's styles alter than we do. All I can dope out is that some one in Paris — darn his buttons! — decided all at once that women should cut out wearing petticoats. Well — there you are. What could we do about it? What chance did we have alongside of this French bird? Why, the women dropped petticoats overnight!"

Winifred nodded her comprehension.

"The only ones that keep on wearing 'em are the old ladies," added the rueful Sherbondy. "And they don't move around enough to wear out one petticoat in ten years!"

The three stockholders stared at the Baluchistan rug.

Winifred again broke the silence.

"What's the best thing to be done?"

"I've talked that over with Avery a good many times." The organizer of the unlucky enterprise tilted back in his chair and smoothed his disarrayed hair. "One thing's sure: we can't keep on running. Our rent'd eat up what little money we'd make and more besides. Thank the Lord, we don't owe the bank a penny, or anybody else."

His far-away look indicated he had finished speaking.

"You think we'd better either sell our machines or store them," prodded Avery after an interval.

"Yes." Sherbondy's attention focussed again somewhat abruptly. "But I don't know which. If we sell our plant now, we'll have to take almost a total loss; nobody wants our type of machines. On the other hand, storage is expensive — and petticoats may never come in again." He exhaled an unintended little squeak of despondency.

They all continued to survey the remains with stony eyes.

"What do you say?" asked the chairman, finally. "Shall we gamble a little longer?"

"There's not much left to lose," Avery suggested. They looked interrogatingly at Winifred.

"Whatever you say," she acquiesced listlessly, and stood up. "Do you want me for anything else?"

Saul Sherbondy appeared more deeply regretful than ever when he bade them good-bye.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," said he. "It's not my fault at all, as far as I can see, yet I can't help feeling personally responsible, in a way. All I'll say is this: some day I'm going to make it up to you — several times over. I'm not the kind that stays down for long."

"Poor old Saul!" Avery felt even more uncomfortable now that he was alone with Winifred. "He takes it harder than I do. He's almost broke — had to sell his automobile."

Manifestly, his sister was under restraint. "I'm only sorry on your account, Avery."

"Not at all. You're the one to be worried about — and I want you to know, Winifred, I consider that five

thousand dollars a personal loan to me. I'll pay back every cent of it."

She was still in mourning. Her black coat and skirt, her crape-swathed hat were unbecoming; and it saddened him to note the indications of a lack of neatness in her appearance. That disfigurement of a nose was growing red with cold; those incisors still jutted out with their old expression of meagre sapience.

"No, I took the chance," she disagreed. "But let's not talk about it any more now. It seems ages since that good talk we had together — that night. And I've hardly had a chance to say hello to you since."

She did not mean to reprove him — that was clear; yet he was smitten with the most penetrating compunction.

"I can't tell you how much I miss mother sometimes," she went on.

Another unconsciously poignant thrust. He himself had been so full of his new hopes and circumstances he rarely thought of the dead woman. He had visited her grave just once — and then, perfunctorily.

It came to him now that his sister must have been desperately lonesome in the solitary room she occupied. Mother and daughter had been very close to each other; Agatha had supplied inexhaustible reservoirs of self-assurance to her unattractive daughter. Now she was gone; and he, her logical successor, had proven heartlessly — no, stupidly, recreant. That Ruby disliked Winifred was no justification at all.

"I know," he said contritely. "I seem to be swamped with details every minute. I'm absolutely

bushed each night when I get to bed." He broke off his excuses, as a sudden alarming question occurred to him. "Say, Winifred, how are you going to get along now — I mean, for money?"

She tried to reassure him with a smile. "Oh, I'm all right. I guess you didn't know — I've been going to a business college."

"What?"

"In about another month, I'll be pounding a typewriter somewhere for ten or fifteen a week. Chewing gum, too, I suppose. Oh, I couldn't stay in that room alone another day!"

She took his arm; and again that blessed stream of affection seemed to flow warmly into him. "How about you? What are you going to do?" Her eyes were shining now — just as they had before.

He curved his lips down self-mockingly.

"The dear old trust company's promised me my job back. It means Ruby and I'll have to move again, to some cheaper flat." He pictured his wife's stricken face, when he should tell her. "Ruby's going to have a baby in May, you know."

4

Labour pains clutched Ruby at two o'clock in the morning of the last day of April.

"It doesn't seem possible," Avery reasoned. The scheduled date was still eight days off. "Must be a false alarm."

His wife was temporarily free from the griping distress.

"It's liable to happen any time now, Dr. Colquitt said."

The rhythmical ebb and flow of parturient torture slowly quickened in tempo. At six the gynecologist finally came, grey-faced.

"I think it's the real thing," he told Avery. "We'd better get her to the hospital."

Ruby was revealing an unsuspected fortitude. Her lips were forced together during the crests of the spasms; she apologized for the low moaning she occasionally gave forth.

"It seems to make it easier," she said.

Avery was paying dear for each separate grievance he had ever cherished against her.

What if she should die?

As he helped her dress, she reminded him to leave a key out for the laundress the following Monday morning.

"Will you telegraph mother?" she bethought herself to ask.

He had a moment of deep gratitude. Mrs. McPhee had planned to come the middle of the following week. The terrific ordeal ahead would have appeared unbearable to him, were his mother-in-law there.

The physician drove them to the hospital in his motor car.

Even now the thing savoured of unreality. He had tried to imagine having a baby in the house, and could not. Only once had he sensed the actual — when, a week ago, he had suddenly come upon a tiny woollen shirt in a bureau drawer.

The motor car stopped in front of the brick hospital. The instant Ruby was wheeled into the small white room, a corps of nurses descended upon her. By their very numbers they ejected him.

He found himself walking agitatedly up and down the narrow, rubber-matted corridor outside. Another distraught husband passed and re-passed him.

"Your first?" clipped out this other vicarious sufferer.

Avery nodded.

"Hell, ain't it?"

They paused to examine each other an instant, as if to find some dreadful confirmation in one another's mien; then a sudden access of pungent foreboding drove them on their ways once more. Something terrible might happen, Avery felt, unless he kept on walking.

An irreverent interne wheeled a stretcher past him. Under the white sheet, that immobile something was assuredly a human figure. The smell of ether assailed his nostrils faintly.

"My wife's up in the labour room now." This other not-quite-a-father had articulated once more, but neither of them paused.

Nurses glided in and out of Ruby's torture-cell — and an interne dangling what looked like a telephone receiver.

A piercing helplessness wrung his heart: *what were they doing to her in there* — these calloused creatures who bore so devil-may-care an air? Each time he passed her door, his whole being shrank from the shrieks of awful agony he felt sure must presently issue.

He recalled the solacing words of the ancient midwife who had been giving Ruby massage treatments during confinement:

"Oh, you'll do your bit o' screamin' all right, missy."

A nurse came up to him.

"You can come in for a little while now," she said.

He braced himself for the shock of seeing his wife in the grip of unspeakable anguish. But she was standing up and walking about the little room in her heliotrope kimono. She even smiled a little; temporarily she had no pain. He was amazed.

"See my pig-tails?" She held out a plait of her braided dark hair. Laughing, she appeared very girlish.

"Oh, my dear!" he breathed.

The smile left her face, an unseeing stare took its place, then she winced and bent far over the brass bar at the foot of the bed.

"That helps her," explained a nurse. "She ought to have been kept on her feet from the time the pains started."

A moment, and Ruby came toward him once more.

"You'd better go," she said. "There isn't anything you can do, and you'd just worry."

Worry! As if the simple expedient of leaving the hospital could put an end to that.

As he was leaving the obstetrical ward, he met Dr. Colquitt.

The specialist was in his most defensive mood; he had no intention of letting any young husband sob on his shoulder.

"Come back in about three hours," he directed. Avery himself felt he was calmness personified.

"I just wanted to say the case is entirely in your hands, doctor. If a Caesarian seems necessary—"

Dr. Colquitt failed to be touched by this tribute. "Oh, no, nothing like that." He was gone.

Three hours!

He continued aware of pride in his self-restraint . . . and yet . . . Ruby perhaps, at this very moment, was just at the climax of anguish.

Why must such things be?

He passed a drug-store, and was startled to observe the extreme pallor of the face that peered back at him from the mirror in the window.

He looked at his watch. Another half hour.

In that desolate hospital room, with no one there who really cared. . . . Perhaps she was dying and they were trying to find him.

He could not stay away any longer.

The door was ajar, her room empty.

He became aware of a hand stretched toward him, and descried the other young husband grinning fatuously.

"It's a girl!" he gushed. "Seven pounds."

He *would* shake hands.

Ruby must be in that mythical labour-room. He wandered miserably, ineptly, to the end of the corridor.

Through a door slightly open came the smell of ether.

"That's enough!" The sharp voice was Dr. Colquitt's.

Avery stood paralysed.

Thank God — she was not feeling the pain any more.

But a low groan floated out.

Another man's voice said:

"Let's break the straps this time — will we, Mrs. Zell?"

The anaesthetist. Avery could just catch a glimpse of him through the crack, and a pillow on the end of a white table — and on that pillow a braid of dark hair.

A nurse's white-cuffed hand rested inadvertently at one side of the pillow. Avery saw the anaesthetist's fingers slip underneath the pillow and its tortured burden, and squeeze the nurse's hand.

He fled up the corridor and out into the April sunshine.

"An extremely difficult case," Dr. Colquitt told him. "We tried to get along without instruments, but we couldn't." His face was seamed with exhaustion.

Avery followed the nurse to a room whence reverberated the crying of many babies.

"Wait here," she bade him, and brought out a basket.

He looked down anxiously, and beheld a small head that seemed alarmingly disproportionate.

"It's pulled out of shape now," the nurse reassured him, "but it'll round out all right in a couple of days.

All those scratches on his face are from the instruments."

"It's a boy?"

"Sure is! . . . Ten pounds."

He'd like to meet that other proud father now!

"How do you ever tell all these kids apart?" His tone was light, but a horrible fear of their getting *his* baby mixed up with somebody else's was gnawing at his vitals.

The nurse indicated a small inscribed band about the infant's wrist. "We sew those on before we leave the labour-room. Better go and tell your wife that."

Even now he could get no sense of the reality of the miracle.

When he bent to kiss Ruby, her breath was still heavily ether-laden.

"Pretty bad." She moistened her lips feebly.

Deeply moved, he strove to be jocular.

"I'll bet you have five more."

A look of determination vivified her listless, lethargic demeanour.

"Never again," she said. "*Never!*"

5

The alarm clock rang at six. Ruby, with her never-relaxing, punctual devotion, rose promptly and bore the sleeping infant off to the bathroom for the day's first feeding. A delightful laziness pervaded Avery; he could doze for another hour. For this he was excessively grateful; he had had to procure water for his offspring during the night, and he felt very tired.

Scarcely had he relapsed into the delectable sea of drowsiness when the door-bell resounded. With muffled profanity, he emerged from the warm bed-clothes into the chilly air of the hall.

"Yes?" he called down the speaking tube.

"Coal!"

Avery continued to swear. "My Lord! Haven't they got any sense, sending that stuff around this time of the morning?" But when he had hastily donned his dressing-gown and descended two flights of stairs to the basement, he managed to be very civil to the unshaven, already grimy coal-man.

He hurried back to bed and tried to re-capture his delicious quiescence. The baby's penetrating cries came faintly through the bathroom door; it was as if a mosquito were singing about his ears.

"Damn that kid, anyway!"

At intervals came the distant thunder of the coal being emptied into the cellar. The more intensely he attempted to go back to sleep, the wider awake he grew.

"Avery!" percolated his wife's importunate voice.

He answered inarticulately. The knowledge that she wanted him acted as a powerful soporific; immediately he gravitated toward unconsciousness.

Her second summons was querulous.

"Come here, can't you?"

He found her "changing" the baby. Her hair strayed down over her forehead and ears; her cheeks had none of their usual high colour; her whole face mirrored slatternly fatigue. The dressing gown she

wore was wrinkled and slightly soiled. His offspring lay on the canvas stretcher — half-dressed, eyes shut tight, red face wrinkled — screeching.

Ruby looked around indignantly. He perceived she was on the point of crying.

"I don't see why you can't come when I need you," she said.

He did not join issue with her. Two years had revealed to him the supreme folly of a sharp answer.

"What is it?"

She was compelled to shout, that her voice might be heard above the screaming.

"That faucet." Her head twitched toward the washstand. "It leaks so much there's never any hot water in the morning. You'll have to turn on the heater."

He started morosely out of the bathroom.

"I've asked you a dozen times to fix it," she pursued inexorably. "We don't want to have to waste three dollars on a plumber."

A retort of five short words would crumple her into tears, and give him an instant's riddance of wrath; but once more the discipline from many such encounters intervened. He descended the back stairs like some pale disconsolate spectre — wondering dimly just why he had ever gotten married. The enigma was with him frequently these days. Ardent recollections of the excitement, the free range and scope, the irresponsibility, of his bachelorhood, drifted through his consciousness alluringly.

And the baby! Why on earth had they wanted one?

Ruby was exhausted now from morning to night — he really had to admit she was admirable in her devotion, though. The greater her fatigue, the more unreasonable she became. It might be different, he supposed, if he were wildly enthusiastic about Avery, Junior. But he wasn't. He had felt no thrill over his child at any time. He admitted it. A baby was a nuisance.

"What do I get out of all this?" he demanded bitterly of himself. "I sweat all day at a second-rate job, and get bawled out all night."

The open basement window admitted a column of chilly air. The coal-man was nowhere visible; he must have worked fast. The new coal formed a dark mass on the floor. Avery started to mount the pyramid with the intention of closing the window.

A sudden exclamation escaped him. He bent lower and examined the coal closely. Incredulous, dismayed, he picked up a piece. It was a foot thick. And that was as small a lump as he could find in the mound.

He staggered to the furnace door. Had his burden been one-half as large, he could not have inserted it.

The piece of coal dropped to the cement floor ponderously. He stood and stared down at it. An impotent anger swept through him.

"Idiots! Do they think I'm going to spend the whole winter chopping up that damned coal?"

His roving eye came to a pause upon the furnace door which hung open. Suddenly his choler faded into trepidation, for the fire within had almost expired. He seized an ax, and began striking frantically at the huge piece of coal. A small fragment narrowly missed

his eye. The coal proved tough; by the time he had sufficiently rended it, the glow in the bowl of the furnace had turned grey.

He rubbed his beaded forehead with sooty fingers and sat down on a box, completely crushed. In a moment, he sneezed. The shaft of November air from the open window seemed to have concentrated on his perspiring body.

The sense of his grievances grew more acute; he was not to be allowed an instant's peace, even to indulge his woe. He clambered up that ridiculous coal-pile, closed the window and prepared to retreat upstairs.

"What did I come down here for?"

He remembered the water-heater. Ruby was doubtless beside herself by now, because no hot water had materialized. He lighted the gas with an expression almost chastened.

Had he been a wiser, subtler person, he would have recognized the temporary hostility of Fate and stolen meekly away to obscurity till the sun shone again. But a species of martyred frenzy now took hold of him: he decided he would fix the offending bathroom faucet.

When he attempted to shut off the hot water, his troubles began afresh. The stopcock seemed rusted in; he could not budge it; when he tried to hammer it loose, it promptly and brittlely broke off. After a determined search he found a wrench. The instant he finally succeeded in turning the truncated petcock, water spurted down alarmingly on him through the waste-tube. One fine stream, escaping through a loose joint, sprayed him demoniacally in the eye; whichever way he

dodged, the tiny cascade seemed to pursue him. When he endeavoured to insert a pointed stick in the waste-tube — as he had seen a plumber do — the torrent coursed up his sleeve. All at once, the gas-heater vindicated itself; the water became boiling lava. With a cry of pain, Avery dropped the wrench, the pointed stick, and stumbled backward — into the ash pile.

The sprawling ludicrous figure began to palpitate. The gods had done their worst. Uncontrollable mirth possessed him. When he stood up at last, the ashes clung to his wet dressing gown; they were even in his hair. He laughed all the more. He had a vivid picture of the ridiculous figure he had cut in his encounter with this unseen antagonist, this mocking incubus that lurks in coal-piles and furnace and hot-water pipes.

Upstairs, in the kitchen, he found the floor inundated. The chain of evil events became more ex-cruciatingly funny every moment. He grinned.

The flood proceeded from underneath the refrigerator.

"Stuffed drain-pipe," he said easily.

He rolled the refrigerator out from the wall with meticulous caution, so that the battery of empty milk bottles on the top might not wobble ever so slightly. He winked humorously, as he stooped to examine the waste-pipe. But even as his hands relinquished the refrigerator, its heavy bulk tilted toward him, weirdly, unaccountably. A milk bottle toppled and struck him on the back of the shoulder. He clutched at the refrigerator and restored its equilibrium. The two rear

casters were missing; the refrigerator had been supported by the wall for lo! these many years.

Avery decided he had his hands full, without giving his attention to the drain-pipe. It seemed best to push the ice-box back to its former deceptive posture. But there lay the difficulty: he could not push it back without depriving it of its uprightness and sending the milk-bottles smashing to the floor. He must half-pull, half-coax the ungainly contrivance back into place. He reminded himself of a bass-viol contortionist, or a very feeble youth endeavouring to dance with a fat girl who insisted on "leading."

There — the thing was accomplished! He stood back, grinning more broadly than ever.

Ruby screamed her expostulation when his begrimed figure appeared at the door of the bathroom. It appeared she was quite incapable of descrying the rich, robust humour of his adventures.

"Don't come near the baby!" she proscribed shrilly. "He's got a bad cold already."

At that, he became sour-spirited once more. Since the advent of Avery, Junior, she had become more self-important, more cocksure than ever — and he, more negligible, more of a by-product. Ruby never would allow him even to hold the baby. Just as if he had been a leper!

"It isn't the modern way," she would proclaim.

True, she was consistent. The one and only quarrel of record between Ruby and her mother arose out of Mrs. McPhee's thwarted attempts to kiss the child.

And now he had laboriously repaired the ravages of

the morning's evil destiny: the furnace was aglow, the faucet functioned admirably, the drain-pipe not quite so admirably; and, already half an hour late, he was gulping down in solitude the breakfast he had prepared — when Ruby again called to him from the bathroom.

“Avery! Come here a minute, please!”

It was that “please” and the helpless note in her voice that brought him quickly to her side. Her eyes were wide open with anxiety and distress. Avery, Junior, still screamed from the stretcher; but his father at once detected a frothy mucous at his nostrils and lips; and even a more disinterested ear could have noted the change in the quality of his outcry from mere restlessness to real pain.

“What is it?” Avery asked.

“Oh, Avery, something terrible has happened. You know the argyrol I’ve been putting in his nose — for his cold?”

He nodded.

Ruby was in the farthest zone of despair. She spoke mechanically:

“Well — I’m so tired I hardly know what I’m doing, and I made a mistake in the bottles and gave him iodine instead.”

Avery was aware of a fine filament of terror for an instant. Then he felt more keenly his wife’s need of reassurance.

“That’s not very serious.”

She was almost annoyed. “But it’s poison! It says so on the bottle.”

"Not the amount he's gotten. Here! Turn him over on his face, so it won't run down in his throat any more." His eyes chanced on a bottle of American Oil. "Put some of that in his nose. It'll ease the burning."

He was giving orders, and she obeying — unquestioningly. Her relief was pathetic, yet her fears lingered stubbornly.

"Shall I call up the pediatrician?"

He stared. "The what?"

"The child specialist. Dr. Keyes. He could probably tell us what to do."

Us!

Avery smiled. "Yes."

She hurried out of the bathroom.

That discharge from the screaming infant's nose and mouth was not a pretty sight. Perhaps he had belittled the seriousness of the accident. His child began to choke, to fight for breath.

Avery's heart knew the pangs of anxiety, of pity. He took the baby in his arms, put him over his shoulder, face down, and gently patted his back.

He thought: "I'm really doing something for him at last."

The baby had stopped gasping and re-commenced his uninterrupted outcry. His very small fingers, closing and opening with woe, encountered Avery's ear, held entreatingly fast to it for one instant.

Avery discovered he loved his son intensely.

Ruby reappeared, tears running down her cheeks.

"Dr. Keyes says it's not serious — and we did just the right thing."

We!

"Let me take him now," said Ruby.

III. The Evocation



Chapter One: Stagnation

I

RUBY, fully dressed for the dinner party, came quickly out of the living room. Her eyes were shining, and Avery sustained a mild surprise that his home-coming should be thus acclaimed.

"Let's see!" She snatched the evening paper from his hand.

He hung up his overcoat and derby, disillusioned.

"Here it is!" she called from the living room.

He found her at the reading lamp, the newspaper spread out on the table. Her nostrils expanding with triumph, she pointed to a paragraph.

Avery extracted his spectacles and read:

WHAT WOMEN ARE DOING

Mr. Dutro Nicely is in Cleveland.

The Rev. C. C. Terwilliger has returned from a few days' visit in Dubuque, Ia.

He looked up in perplexity. "I don't see —"

"No — there!" her forefinger once more indicated the precise spot.

Mr. and Mrs. Avery Zell are entertaining Mr. Aubrey Milhollin, the celebrated playwright, at dinner this evening in their new home, 1915 Cherokee Avenue. Mr. Milhollin, who was at Cornwallis University with Mr. Zell, is in the city this week for the first production of his new comedy, "Ditching Diana," at the Globe.

To meet the distinguished guest, Mrs. Zell has invited Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lucius and Mr. Saul Sherbondy.

Avery smiled tamely. "Fine! Old Saul will be tickled to death to have his name in the paper."

"I should think he might be!" Ruby tossed her head. "I can't see for the life of me why you had to crowd him in. I had too many men already."

He soothed her:

"Because he's an old friend of Aubrey's. And his machine — you may find it mighty handy before the evening's over."

But she refused to be placated. "Where'd he get the money to buy it with? Tell me that! If he hadn't cheated you out of ten thousand dollars, I guess we'd be riding around in an automobile, instead of him!"

"Oh, chop it, can't you! Sherbondy's as honest as they make 'em. Just another one of your crazy ideas! Besides, didn't I give in to you about Winifred — and now she'll read this silly guff in the paper, and know we were ashamed to invite her."

The stinging words rushed to his lips — but no further. Being a wise man, and a husband of some seven years' service, he was on the way to the bedroom by now. Besides, it was just as much fun to imagine he had really thus assaulted her — and one thereby

escaped those frenzies of weeping and recrimination, and that painful necessity of an abject, tongue-in-cheek, begging for forgiveness.

"They're all the same, once you've married 'em," he philosophized sagely. "Ruby's got her good points. She's not so bad."

A model housekeeper, certainly. The small bedroom he entered was conspicuously neat. He did object, though, to the sewing machine in the corner. His wife had a way of cramming in the most inharmonious objects. In the closet, where he rummaged hurriedly for his evening clothes, stood one of those absurd dummies upon which saving wives perform certain mystic dress-making operations.

He was a little regretful about Winifred, though.

Already it was after six o'clock, and he plunged feverishly into his change of attire. Aubrey wanted to be at the theatre a little after eight. Dinner was to be served by Ruby's imported negro maid at six-thirty sharp.

Even now the door-bell resounded in the rear of the house, and shortly, his brother-in-law inserted his head into the room.

"Great Scott!" Avery interjected. "Don't do that again. I thought I was going to be married all over."

Alfred Lucius had grown more serious-looking in six years, and slightly thinner.

"No such luck!" he vouchsafed with a wink.

"How's Margaret?"

"Tip-top."

"And your mother-in-law?" Avery assumed an expression of consummate anxiety.

"Extremely well-preserved. And yours — is she coming to visit you soon?" Lucius breathed heavily and suddenly detonated a succession of bass guffaws.

"Sh!" Avery warned. "The kid's asleep in the next room."

"Oh!" Alfred's honest features readjusted themselves into a look of concern. "Is he better?"

The host nodded briefly. "A little." He was struggling to pinion his high collar in the front. "He's going to have his tonsils out tomorrow. We hope that'll help him a lot."

Just as he finished dressing, Saul Sherbondy arrived with the guest of honour. Avery could have recognized Aubrey, but he had changed considerably. He was so immaculate, so flawless. His raw, slatternly days as a newspaper reporter seemed unthinkable. Then, his *savoir faire* was a palpable affectation to cover his natural shyness; now his veneer was so impenetrable it seemed to have absorbed entirely those humbler beginnings.

He greeted them all quite gravely, without effusiveness. It was not required of him to be demonstrative. He could afford to maintain his air of reserve, to await their tentative advances.

Ruby's inhibitions had entirely effervesced. She fairly hurled herself at Aubrey. Her cheeks were very red, and she laughed incessantly. He sat back, lightly parrying her avalanche of words, his glances already darting off toward Margaret's provocative face. With

one look he seemed to have evaluated them all, and the furnishings of the compact living room. At once, Avery felt apologetic for the new house. It really was a middle-class affair. There was no spaciousness to it. He was sorry he had suggested the party for Aubrey.

Throughout the dinner he continued ill at ease. It was so apparent that the coloured maid was a special dispensation for the evening. She was not even well-trained. Dishes clattered in the kitchen continuously; she waxed incredibly noisy and awkward as the meal progressed. As often as he dared he cast sidelong glances at Aubrey. The Great American Playwright sat for the most part silent, and to Avery, he appeared extremely bored by the chatter of his hostess.

Ruby rattled on interminably.

"Perhaps you don't know it," she said archly, "but I came very near going on the stage myself."

Aubrey's encouragement was a slight elevation of the eye-brows.

"Yes," Ruby continued, quite as if he had begged further enlightenment. "My friends were kind enough to say I had a career before me. But of course, I gave all that up when I married."

Avery suppressed his irritation. This was one of the beribboned banderillas with which she tormented him on occasion.

The distinguished dramatist turned toward him with an expression of covert injury.

"Why didn't you tell me this, Avery?" he demanded.

The career-destroyer managed the expected smile of humble gratitude. Inwardly he was furious. He wished he dared come out with what he really thought about that career. She had married him with his solemn assurance that her professional future would not be interfered with. He would have been glad to help her. But she had settled into domesticity without a protest.

"Why don't you recite something for Aubrey, after dinner?" he proposed sweetly.

It was the most skilful twist he could have contrived. It released him from their scrutiny, and it flattered his wife. Ruby sat back, protesting that she was entirely out of practice. They all chorused his suggestion, Saul Sherbondy and Lucius vociferously. A fleeting look of high humour passed between Avery and Margaret Lucius; quite subtly, they both sensed that Aubrey Milhollin had intercepted and corroborated their telepathy. The three of them understood. They had suddenly discovered they spoke the same language. Again, that strange cleavage into opposing camps. He always felt sure of finding the nimble Margaret on his side, just as he could always count on discovering Ruby among the opposition; it came as a pleasant and reassuring surprise, though, that Aubrey Milhollin was of his own sort. Even more of Margaret's sort, to judge from the flickers of animation that came over the guest's features when his eyes encountered hers.

It diverted Avery to perceive that the two sisters, so antithetical in disposition, should in one respect be so alike. Both of them seemed in a very ecstasy of mood;

the dinner, to them, was an affair of enormous importance, an opportunity; they had anticipated it for days. But the four men seemed by comparison sluggish: Sherbondy, the misogynist, the man of the world, was plainly out of his depth in this polite atmosphere; Aubrey was bored; and Alfred Lucius and Avery had been disciplined into perfect specimens of the dumb American husband.

Margaret Lucius succeeded in breaking through one of her sister's clichés to ask the playwright about his latest London production.

"A very fair success." Aubrey's first genuine smile came into being. "I saw the rehearsals — just happened to go through England on my way back from Germany."

"Germany — were you there —"

He nodded. "I was in Munich the day war was declared. Had the devil's own time getting out — even without my trunks."

Attention grew taut instantly. Even Sherbondy and Lucius hung on his words. That he was a playwright famous on two continents signified little to them, as sensible business men; but a first-hand account of war conditions — that was quite a different matter.

It came as a bewilderment to all of them that Aubrey, under a thin disguise of impartiality, was pro-German.

"They know what civilization is," he told them. "I learned more about the technique of the drama in Germany in a month than I could have in France, in years. All the great thinkers, writers, musicians today

are Germans. And Berlin — a city without slums! That means something.”

Ruby screwed up her features into polite disapprobation. “But those atrocities. I heard just the other day about a Belgian baby —”

“Propaganda — Allied propaganda — mostly.”

Avery found his intense admiration and envy of his friend punctured by keen doubts. Not because of his extolment of things German, of course. Rather because he suddenly seemed so devitalized, so languid, so much the hot-house flower.

He was glad when Alfred Lucius took up clumsy cudgels for England and France. But Aubrey would not be drawn into a rough-and-tumble argument.

“Wait and see,” he advised portentously. “Why get excited?”

Lucius’ wide face was flushed with earnestness. He said: “Because this country’ll be in the scrap sure as you’re born — sooner or later.”

No one spoke. The six stared at each other morosely.

Ruby’s forehead wrinkled with chagrin. To have the party — *her* party — come to this seemed too much, really.

“Avery, don’t scowl so!” she cried. “It’s his indigestion. He always looks that way when he eats too much,” she announced to Milhollin.

The war was forgotten. They all laughed at Avery.

Ruby was merciless. “The doctor says it’s hyperacidity,” she confided to the whole table. “He can’t have any fries or pastry, or anything like that.”

Again his sense of humour outstripped his annoyance. She was so absurd, so self-satisfied in her limited way, this conventional respectable woman who was his wife. Why give her the power to ruffle his philosophical calm? It helped, too, to discern the amusement in the eyes of Aubrey and Margaret.

One can exist fairly comfortably under very trying circumstances, he reflected, once one has cut loose from personal pride.

Aubrey smiled once more at Margaret and glanced at his watch.

"Sorry," he said. "I promised the stage manager I'd give him a few changes in the manuscript by eight o'clock. The first act needs pointing-up."

Sherbondy emerged from his self-conscious silence to suggest that they all go to the theatre together in his car.

"It's seven-forty already," he put forward.

While they waited for Ruby and Margaret, Aubrey singled Avery out.

"Still shielding the widow and orphan, I hear." He smoothed back his faultless pompadour of thin blond hair.

"Yes." Avery was in a defensive mood.

The playwright's manner was perfectly detached. "Let's see, you had a sister — Winifred, wasn't that her name?"

Saul Sherbondy had intervened. "He still has that same sister, and believe me, she's a trump. Say, Ave, that reminds me I want to see her and you. How about tomorrow noon?"

"I've got to help the kid through his operation at one o'clock. We might make it at twelve."

Even as he spoke, the cries of Avery, Junior, descended from the second floor. Ruby came into the living room looking thoroughly aggrieved.

"I can't go, people. The baby's fretting."

Involuntarily, Avery said:

"I can watch him. You go ahead and enjoy yourself."

Her relief was obvious, but she quickly countered:

"Of course, I wasn't going just to enjoy myself. But it would help me so much professionally, to see a play with Mr. Milhollin. And it would do you so much good to get to bed early, darling." She added to the others: "He really doesn't enjoy the theatre, anyway."

Aubrey appeared genuinely regretful upon leaving, and for the first time, quite unaffected.

"I want to see you again, Avery. Take dinner with me Saturday night, can't you?"

Avery listened to the initial burst of energy from Saul Sherbondy's motor outside, then patiently climbed the stairs toward the wailings of his small son.

2

"It's this way," began Sherbondy expansively. His expression was benevolently gleeful. "Remember the night when I stopped to look at that weighing-machine outside the Constantinople?"

Avery nodded gravely. The three were in his office; the solemn intimations of the place oppressed him.

But the pilot of the ill-fated petticoat venture refused to be less than ebullient. He turned to Winifred.

"Just a ramshackle penny-in-the-slot affair for weighing people. Well, you know, that idea kept sticking in my crop. Seemed to me somebody could make money with those things. The quickest way to get rich, y' know, is to find some luxury that people want and that's cheap. I looked into the business finally. The weighing-machines you see around are bum ones, usually outdoors, exposed to the weather, and always out of order. Now I said to myself, 'If you could get some *good* scales — with plenty of bright paint and nickel-plate — and put 'em indoors — in hotels and stores, like — you could make your everlasting fortune.' "

Avery's mind, by this time thoroughly steeped in trust company conservatism, did not react enthusiastically. "Another one of Saul's gambling propositions," he thought.

Winifred was still naïve about financial matters. "Of course," she said.

Sherbondy caressed his smooth chin cannily.

"Well, sir, I've got the thing started, and believe me — it's going t' be even better 'n I figured. I got ten machines placed in hotels and ten-cent stores here, on a fifty-fifty basis, and they're beauties. Maybe you've seen 'em: 'Your Exact Weight For Five Cents,' it says on 'em. And d'you know, I'm making over ten dollars a day clear profit right now."

"Fine!" Winifred encouraged.

He lifted a plump hand deprecatingly. "That's only the beginning, Miss Zell. I believe there are a hundred thousand places in this country where I could put machines, if I had the capital."

At this last word, Avery's polite attention grew tenser. "I begin to see," he told himself.

"Now what I'm driving at 's this: you people lost a lot of money with me — without a whimper. I liked the way you took it. Most people would have gotten nasty. When I said you'd get your money back, I meant it. This weighing-machine business is going to be a bonanza, and I'd like t' have you in with me."

"I thought so," Avery silently chuckled. "If you ever see the colour of any more of my money, old boy, I'll be surprised."

"Understand, that hasn't got anything to do with getting back the money you lost in petticoats. I'm going to see to that, anyhow. But I want you both to make a big wad on me."

Avery's response was immediate and precise:

"I don't see how we can go into it, Saul. It's too speculative, especially for a man with a wife and kid. As a matter of fact, I have almost no spare cash." To be thoroughly courteous, he supplemented: "Of course, Winifred may feel differently."

"I'd like to think it over," she shocked his brotherly omniscience by replying. "Anyway, I'm very glad to hear the good news. I suppose that means you won't be selling your friends any more accident insurance."

For one instant, the incredible occurred: Sherbondy looked crestfallen — even a little ashamed; and Avery

understood. He knew of course that his friend had been soliciting insurance ever since the failure of the Milady Petticoat Company. Sherbondy was a most persuasive salesman; he had almost convinced Avery. But to have taken advantage of Winifred's credulity, just for a few miserable dollars — that was too bad. And accident insurance! She couldn't afford it and she didn't need it.

"I think it was the limit of him," he fulminated, after Sherbondy had gone.

"But why?" Winifred's dark eye met his fairly. "I need accident insurance as much as anybody. Suppose I should get run over."

He shook his head. She was a pathetic figure to him in her poorly fitting black suit and shapeless shoes.

"I notice Saul said nothing to me about it. And this latest dream of his — you aren't seriously thinking of throwing away any more money with him?"

"I don't know —"

"Why, Winifred, you ought to have a guardian! Saul Sherbondy's a fine fellow, but absolutely untrustworthy when it comes to money."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's strange, but I have a pretty definite intuition about people. The first time I ever saw Mr. Sherbondy, I thought to myself — 'There's a man you can have confidence in.' I still feel that way."

His telephone rang.

When he hung up the receiver, his face was clouded with fresh anxiety.

"It's Ruby. She's sick and can't bring the kid down to the doctor's office."

Her features, which always seemed repressively set nowadays, lighted up.

"Couldn't I go get him?"

"It isn't that," he disabused. "The neighbour next door is bringing him down in her electric. But some one's got to hold his hand during the operation. I must confess I'm woozy about such things."

"I'd love to do it," Winifred said with an eagerness that was pitiful.

From the doctor's office she telephoned the claim department of the railroad where she worked, and secured an additional hour's recess.

Avery, Junior, was in a tearful, frightened state when he arrived.

"It won't hurt you a bit, sonny," his father assured him. The throat specialist had recommended local anaesthesia, as much more convenient and equally painless.

The little boy clearly considered his father infallible. He stopped crying at once, regarded his new white stockings with pride.

The throat specialist appeared, dreadfully business-like in a white coat. His manner was artfully facetious.

"Is this the little man?"

He conducted them to a dark-room, sat the boy on a white-enamelled stool, adjusted a circular reflector to his head.

"Open — wide!" he directed.

"The doctor isn't going to hurt you." Avery's reassurance again quieted the child.

A nurse produced a tray of gleaming instruments.

Avery whispered to his sister:

"I think I'll slip out now. I can't stand this sort of thing."

Winifred nodded her sympathetic comprehension.

The door of the operating room closed behind him.

It was a thick door, and no sound escaped through it.

Ten, fifteen minutes went by.

Then he heard, very faintly, his boy's cry of pain.

He dropped the weekly he had been reading, and after a moment of indecision, opened the door.

Winifred was wiping bloody froth from her nephew's face. Avery Junior, wept nasally, with a whimpering sound. His mien was that of one who has been basely deceived; his eyes, catching his father's, were reproachful.

"Just in time," greeted the doctor gaily. "All over. How's that for quick work?" He held up a red shred. "Here's one of them. I guess it'll never trouble that boy any more."

The nurse rattled scalpels back into the antiseptic bath.

"He'll be back to normal in two days. With grown-ups, it takes a week," she volunteered.

Avery's heart was heavy with compassion. "Poor little sonny," he said. A small smear of blood shouted accusation from the boy's starched collar.

Winifred told him, as they descended in the ele-

vator, that the doctor had used almost no anaesthetic. "He thought Avery's heart was a little weak, and he was afraid to take a chance."

"Good God!" And he had told his son there would be no hurt. "He'll never believe me again." He held him more tightly in his arms.

"I don't see how I could have gotten along without you," he thanked Winifred.

Her face retained its unusual, alive light. "You make me feel as if I were of some use in the world. I get awfully tired of being just an onlooker."

As they waited on the curb for a taxicab, Avery became aware that a woman had stopped and was scrutinizing him. He looked up and recognized Inez Copeland.

"I thought it was you," she said.

He had to use his left hand to take off his hat. He felt tremendously self-conscious with that strange, sobbing burden on his shoulder, and his unpresentable sister by his side. Many times he had visualized this encounter, but never thus.

"Are you doing any singing?" she asked.

He shook his head stupidly. She seemed impossibly lovely to him; he had an emotion of surprise that such a radiant human being could exist. His standards must have changed woefully.

Winifred had to be introduced. All in all, he felt extremely insignificant, the brand of inferiority upon his son, his sister, even the clothes he wore.

The taxicab appeared.

"I've been away," Inez said. "I want to come and meet your wife."

3

Pedestrians scurried to the curb.

"When I'm in my car, I think all the fools are on foot," Sherbondy called back from the front seat. "When I'm on foot they all seem to be in machines."

"Saul certainly drives like the devil," Avery censured in low tones.

Aubrey Milhollin, sitting by his side in the tonneau seat, moved his fortunate head languidly.

"All undersized men do," he commented. "Makes them forget physical insignificance."

He amazed Avery by taking his hand. "I'm sorry we couldn't have been by ourselves tonight. You appeal to me, somehow."

Avery felt uncomfortable. "You mean my sister-in-law appeals to you," he bantered.

"A very attractive girl, I'll admit," drawled Aubrey, back in his accustomed nonchalance. "I had lunch with her today — though you needn't tell that to her husband."

"What's the idea of mixing in there?" Avery demanded. "You'll only make trouble."

The popular dramatist yawned. "No trouble, I assure you. You know, my boy, you're sadly conventional."

The entire cast of the "Ditching Diana" company had preceded them to the railway station, and now

awaited in little groups the special train that was to take them back to New York. Aubrey introduced his friends to two very pretty young women, one of them the star of the new play. Saul Sherbondy was in his element; but Avery presently found himself alone with the playwright again.

"There seem to be plenty of other attractive girls for you to play with," he resumed. He felt very old in wisdom — very much the virtuous husband.

"But novelty!" argued Aubrey, swinging his cane. "That's the thing. Now take those two girls. Very good looking and very charming. Very. But they give me no sense of thrill. You see, I've lived with each of them six months."

Avery's naïve amazement could not be concealed. "You have!"

"I always prefer to do that, when it's possible. It's the only way one really gets acquainted. But one must have change."

He suddenly swung about to face Avery directly. The habitual smile of disillusion, almost mournful, flitted from his tired face.

"You know, Avery, I really meant what I said about your appealing quality." He was manifestly in the grip of real sincerity once more. "Why don't you clear out of this rubble, and come to New York with me? You're simply sunk here, and you're getting sunken every day."

"I don't see how you figure that out."

"Of course not. You're so sunk you don't realize it. That's the most pathetic part."

Avery laughed. "How could I go to New York — and what could I do?"

"How? Simply take a train. Take this train with me tonight — it won't cost you a cent. Yes, leave your wife. She doesn't fathom you — never will. Leave her for good."

"Thanks — but I'm not a wife-deserter."

"Why not? For Heaven's sake, wake up! You're over thirty years old. You're assistant trust officer of some company, getting three or four thousand dollars a year. Maybe after a while you'll be made the trust officer, and so on. You're a respectable husband and father. Granted all that! But, oh my God, how limited you are! And in what a rut! Your work gives you no outlet; you have no interest in it. You've plodded on because you've had to. Honestly, Avery, I'm only saying this for your own good and because I like you: you're different. Different from all these second-raters around you."

"Give up my job?" Avery interposed vaguely. "Why, what could I do in New York?"

"If nothing else, sing! That's what you ought to be doing. Sing! That's your real self-expression, isn't it?"

"Who told you so?" Avery interrogated surlily.

"I've been looking you up. I met a Miss Copeland last night at dinner. I observe you know her. She agrees with me: I don't believe I'm violating any confidence when I say that. Avery, the only thing that stands in your way is blindness — and lack of guts."

The station gong began ringing. The actors wan-

dered toward the gates. The stentorian voice of a train-announcer reverberated.

Aubrey looked at his friend searchingly.

"Well — are you coming?"

"Hardly, tonight." Avery smiled apathetically.

"Think it over." He shook hands and rescued the two young women from Saul Sherbondy's lingering farewell.

Chapter Two: The Tertium Quid

I

HE came into the sick room, hat in hand.

"You're quite sure there's nothing I can do, Miss Hendrie?"

The nurse eyed him dispassionately.

"Not a thing," she said.

He stood at the foot of the bed a moment, regarding his wife. The ice-bag coiled about her shorn head helmeted her worn face with an unreal, almost grotesque aspect; yet his impression smacked rather of grimness, of bleakness. Her cheeks, usually so round and colourful, were pallid hollows. Their attenuation laid an unaccustomed accent upon her small features; they stood out gauntly in the half-light from the hooded reading-lamp. The face might have been the death-mask of some stern-visaged Puritan. Ruby's eyes were closed; an expression of groping preoccupation seemed unvaryingly to perplex her countenance.

He tiptoed out — from force of habit: he knew that the coma of cerebral meningitis could not be dispelled by the loudest of footsteps. From a different motive, he continued his silent progress as he passed the spare room where his mother-in-law was doubtless taking a nap after her day of vigil. He did not wish to awaken her, to face her patent disapprobation of his truancy.

Twilight had hardly set in as he closed the front door silently, and began walking toward Winifred's rooming-house. Overhead, the trees were misty with the translucent green of fledging leaves. The May evening was fatiguingly humid.

The prick of compunction lingered. Ruby's helplessness had the illogical effect of proving him disloyal. His mere physical presence aided her recovery not at all. He had retained the best medical attendance in the city. Everything possible was being done for her; even Mrs. McPhee could not gainsay that much. Was it recreant of him to take his sister downtown for dinner? Hardly.

Inez Copeland?

His mind stuck there. Certainly most people would condemn him for seeking out Inez while his lawful wife lay on her sick-bed. Conventionally, he was probably disloyal. And yet, as he searched his conscience, he could find no real wrong there. Neither in word nor action — not even in thought — had he been unfaithful. He didn't love Inez; he admired her. She was Aspiration to him. He didn't crave her. She wasn't seductive or alluring or appealing. Quite sincerely he told himself their relationship was asexual; things would have been quite the same had she been cast in male form. It was because she was so fine, so lofty in her mental gestures, so infinitely above human pettiness and indecision, so idealistic, that he felt the need of her. The spectacle of her goodness, her strength, made him mysteriously happy — just as the spectacle of the goodness and strength of a few great men had

made him mysteriously happy and filled him with the sweetness of hope.

Could a Sun Worshipper be said to be disloyal to his wife?

Some faint but definite voice, not of himself, yet from within himself, began:

"Many other men have spoken the same words, Avery Zell — have likewise justified themselves. Such situations always have the same ending. Adoration, aspiration, turn to love. How absurd to think oneself different!"

Still he protested, deeply sincere:

"No, I really believe this *is* different. I don't love Inez. I'm not going to; I couldn't if I tried. She doesn't attract me that way."

"Oh, what is man!" The vocal filament interposed a mocking laugh. "Know you not the function of human reason is to justify that which human senses and instincts desire?"

A little shaken, he arrived at the house where Winifred found lonely shelter. His eyes were still introspective when he pushed open the door of her room and slowly elevated his gaze from the linen rug on the floor to the figure of his sister.

She was seated in a rocking chair and seemed to be staring out of the window. His entrance elicited the faintest of recognition. What first really caught his attention, however, was her clothing: instead of the somewhat dowdy dress of brown georgette crêpe, ornamented with profuse *passementerie*, which she invariably wore on festive occasions, she had on the slightly

soiled cotton house-dress she was wont to assume for her solitary evenings in the room. She did most of her own chamber-work; the house-dress saved her business suit from wear and tear.

His surprise rallied his diffuse perceptives.

"What's the matter, Winnie?" He came up to her, quite ready to be irritated.

She looked quickly in his direction and back through the window, vacantly. Her lower lip was pressed up over those projecting upper teeth of hers. She gave him no answer, but rocked a little back and forth.

His glance sought enlightenment in the darkening room. Over the foot of the bed hung a gay salmon-pink tulle neck-scarf. A pair of tan oxfords toed in, under the edge of the bedspread, with a slatternly effect; one of the shoes, fallen over, betrayed a heel worn sadly up one side. On the near-by bureau his eye detected a curious assortment of toilet soaps in celluloid boxes, bottles of perfume, cans of talcum powder. The odour of sandalwood reached his nostrils.

He began to sense the numb, despairing muteness of the figure in the cheap cotton house-dress. He bent down and looked into her eyes. They were dull with passivity.

At his gentle touch on her hair, though, they became bright with tears.

"I don't know why you can always make me cry," she said. "Affection is more than I can stand, I guess."

He himself was in a highly emotional mood by now, and his poignancy of feeling once more seemed to give him real understanding. He wondered how he could have continued so blind to the gripping appeal of her helplessness, her homeliness, her stifled inexpressiveness — the tragedy of that something fine and vivid caged within her, unable to find vent.

His heart was liquid with pity and remorse. "What is it, dear?"

She had been discharged that afternoon by the manager of the railroad's claim department.

"He was awfully kind to me — said he didn't think the work suited me. Offered to keep me on for another two weeks. But that only made me feel worse, somehow. And I was just thinking about our dinner tonight when he called me into the office."

"Heavens! Is that all?" He attempted to laugh it off. "Why, hundreds of men are looking for stenographers. There's an awful scarcity right now — on account of the war."

This did not appear to restore her. "I've lost my nerve. I'd be ashamed to fail again. My head is no good for details. The worst thing about it all is the money. I've always felt that anyway I was self-supporting, that I wasn't dependent on charity."

Irritation cut in on his sympathy, and he found himself momentarily taking exception to that bugbear of a Holmes nose. He did not see how he could possibly support Winifred. Ruby would never accede to having her in their house.

"How about all that money Saul Sherbondy was going to make for you?" he could not help flinging at her.

She received the sting listlessly. "I haven't heard from him lately."

"Oh, well," he said, determinedly pleasant. "Get on your things, and we'll have our party anyway. We're going to manage somehow."

Her lips only tightened; once more he found the conformation of that set, unhappy mouth deeply moving.

"Why, you mustn't feel so cynical about yourself," he felt impelled to say. "Only a day or two ago, some one was telling me how lovely a sister I had."

Winifred's tone was satirical: "Who said that?" But she looked up at him.

He debated the wisdom of revelation. He had given her the tribute to cheer her up, without thinking of possible aftermaths.

"Do you remember that girl we met on the street — just after the kid's tonsil operation?"

"Miss Copeland?"

He nodded.

The rocking chair ceased its undulation.

"You love her, don't you?"

Her voice was so quiet, so matter-of-fact, that he felt disarmed and had no desire to equivocate. He did not even pretend surprise at his sister's question.

"I don't think so," he answered simply. "No, no — of course I don't love her. I'm very certain I don't."

Her expression revealed she did not believe him.

"I happened to see you with her on the street one day," she pursued. "You ought to be in love with her if you aren't. She could do so much for you."

Afterwards it seemed a remarkable thing that two people could have talked together upon such a subject, without reserve, without concealment. Deep currents of sympathy flowed between them, and no longing seemed sinful or shameful. Perhaps the increasing darkness made self-revelation easier.

"She has already done much for me," Avery said. "More than she could have done if we were in love."

Winifred did not answer that point. But there was no acquiescence in her face, still vaguely illumined by the final residue of daylight.

"It seems to me you and I have never had a real chance," she began slowly — and he could feel the tremendous emotion that emanated from her dim figure. "There was no one to understand us, to direct us. Home, for us, was a place of hatreds, wasn't it? We were deprived of our birthright. So we've just drifted, lived stupid, ordinary lives. And the sad thing is, neither of us is stupid or ordinary. We've never been able to get what was in us, out. The wonderful dreams we had of ourselves have all faded."

What she was saying might have been part of a dream, too; yet his perspectives had never been so clear.

"I've been bitter and restless and wretched for years," her calm voice came out of the shadows once more. "I suppose ugliness is a cross to any woman."

She has no choice about her looks; she's born either pretty or ugly, and that chance almost determines what her life is going to be like. That's the maddening part of it. If beauty were only a reward — something that could be gotten for good conduct — if it were a matter of merit —. Or, taking it for granted I had to be ugly, if some one had only had the understanding to find out what work I was suited for, and set me at it — instead of just pampering and flattering me.

"But all that's past now, Avery. I've really learned what resignation means. I don't care any longer about myself. But I do care about you. You count. When I think of what you might have become, with a little real coaching, it drives me frantic. There's so much going to waste in you. Every day you keep on as you are, the more of a second-rate person you're becoming. That's why I wish you were in love with Inez Copeland. Oh, I'd rather see you an unfaithful husband than anything else I can think of!"

What he said was:

"I can't think of myself as so remarkable. I'm no genius. I'm just about where I deserve to be, and it's not so bad."

Again she chose the more telling confutation of a moment's silence.

"Yes, you've almost lost your courage and your ambition. You're thirty-two years old. In a little while, you'll be middle-aged, and it will be too late. Look here: you aren't really happy, you're just drugged. You don't love Ruby, and she doesn't love you. After her pride had mended, she wouldn't care. I'll see that

nothing goes wrong with Avery, Junior, and later on, when you've succeeded, you can make it up to him a hundred times over."

He knew from the sound of her voice that she had turned toward him. He knew too that the intensity of her emotion had carried across to him; he was aware of restlessness and indecision. But the knowledge persisted he did not love Inez.

"You're the only one I care anything about," said Winifred. "Your happiness means more to me than everything else in the world. You must clear out of all this mess of things and be yourself. You *must!* You'll probably need money. Well — every cent I have left is yours: I want you to take it. *Please!*"

2

It disgusted him to realize there was something furtive in the sidelong glances he bestowed upon the other occupants of the elevator — a certain fearfulness lest he be recognized. Yet his conscience still told him he was doing no wrong.

He was a few minutes early; nevertheless he was conscious of disappointment that Inez was not in her studio. He closed the door, upon which her name was inscribed, over the words: "Voice Culture"; walked about disquietedly. The air in the small room was stuffy. He opened the solitary window, and an influx of warm summer breeze fluttered the pages of the sheet music on the piano.

He was thinking, as he stood at the window surveying the workmanlike, almost bare, studio, of the long

fight against family opposition it represented. Inez' father, her most stubborn antagonist, had died two or three years before. Her mother still obstructed her professional ambitions to the utmost; her daughter's decision to accept an offer in a church quartette was a grievous blow to her; the opening of the studio fell even more heavily.

The wind sent a music-sheet curveting to the floor. Where it alighted lay a small ball of crumpled-up paper. He restored the music to the rack, and threw the paper ball toward the waste-basket. It escaped the rim and rolled along the floor. This time when he picked it up, he observed a few letters in Inez' handwriting on one protruding corner. Curiosity seemed automatically to smooth out the sheet of paper, and he read:

Self-consciousness is stupid; you must henceforth never tolerate its presence within you.

Concentrate always on the meaning of the song, on what you are trying to express. Fill your mind so full of the message you wish to convey that there will be no room left for self-consciousness.

The more you decide not to be self-conscious, the more self-conscious you become. Mere will-power won't get rid of it. You should always fix your mind on the opposite and positive: self-giving.

Don't think about the audience. Think about the song and your interpretation of it.

He compressed the sheet of paper once more, dropped it into the basket, and gazed down at it thoughtfully, hands in his trouser-pockets.

So this was the real Inez, whose outward poise he had ever marvelled at. And that impregnable self-assurance — that effect of joyous disclosure with which she always sang — was specious. Inwardly, she was a shrinking, tremulous girl. The discovery of her vulnerability came as a slight shock to him. She could never be quite the inaccessible Goddess to him again.

Still, that pathetic bit of paper with its mute confession of infirmity, touched him. She suddenly became more human; he knew henceforward her singing would have a new significance, a new appeal. And he felt he might help her.

These duet-rehearsals with her — how they had revived him, musically. Inez it was who had insisted on his resumption of vocal lessons. He was singing much more satisfyingly than ever. The long idleness had benefitted his throat; best of all, when he began singing again, he had suddenly discovered he could produce real head-tones, resonant, alive, yet no longer blatant.

Inez came in just then, in an extremely well-tailored suit of pongee. Had he been a much less percipient person, he could not have helped sensing how his whole body seemed to suspend its processes temporarily, at sight of her. She still had her lethargic moods — long, strange intervals of abeyance when she appeared highly phlegmatic and sluggish, as if she were recuperating from some vast exhaustion: but today, animation shone in her expressive face; her smooth skin, almost olive in its colouring, glowed with inward excitement; her fluid azure eyes mirrored an intense expectancy.

"It's come at last!"

The envelope she handed him contained the proffer from a Brooklyn church of an engagement as contralto soloist, for the term of one year beginning the following October.

Instinctively he thought first of the greatest obstacle.

"Your mother won't consent."

Inez frowned a little. "That isn't controlling any longer. I've so hoped for this — it's the one thing, by the way, my social acquaintance has ever gotten me — and I've thought my way to a definite conclusion. I'm going to take the job. I can almost live on the salary I'll get. It's my opportunity; if I don't seize it, I may never have another. I'm twenty-seven."

Either his face masked the woebegetoneness he felt, or she was too eager. He had never seen her so instinct with energy. She moved about the small room with that characteristic grace that was half awkwardness.

"Henceforth there shall be no more temporizing, no more compromising, in my life," she said. "No more lack of faith. I know what it is I want — have known vaguely for years; now I intend to achieve it."

He found himself keenly conscious of her; his eyes, following her, took note of her large, almost lavish, mouth — a singer's mouth, beyond all question; the round, ample throat and low bosom; the unquenchable health of her tall, vigorous figure. She hardly knew what fatigue meant; she could work for days at high speed. Just now he thought of her as a force rather than as a woman; she seemed more self-sustaining than

ever. He was wholly unnecessary to her, after all, and his heart sickened.

"You *will* achieve it," he said humbly. "It's your destiny. Don't you remember how I was urging you, ages ago, to follow the Gleam?"

That seemed to arrest and divert her course of thinking. Perhaps his voice arraigned her.

"I shall never forget." She came up to him. Her face was precisely on a level with his, but her stature no longer affronted his masculine pride. The look she projected straight into his eyes was deeply stirring; it transmuted infinite gratitude, infinite tenderness and truthfulness.

Then he heard her say:

"I only wish you were coming too. Can't you?"

He visualized his wife in their bedroom, the disfiguring ice-helmet over her clipped head, waging her final, unequal fight against disease; and a savage traitorous hope took form in his heart.

"I don't know — yet," he professed moodily.

He was persuaded she understood.

"No matter what happens," she rejoined, "no matter where we may be, we have our friendship. It's adamant, isn't it?"

Inez held out her hand; he took it; and they remained a moment, searching each other's unspoken meaning. He sensed the need of a greater expressiveness, drew her toward him a little and put his arm about her shoulders. He felt her left arm come over his shoulder and touch his back. She answered his embrace. It still seemed to him their relationship was

completely impersonal; he might have been clasping a brother. He did not even think of kissing her.

They stood apart. The thing was so natural neither experienced self-consciousness.

Inez turned toward the piano. "Perhaps we'd better start rehearsing." She spoke without disquietude. "Your sister will be here soon."

3

It was a very different and transfigured Winifred that greeted him when he appeared at her door, one night late in August, for the long-postponed dinner party. The dark eyes she raised from her book were so infused with a fine, satisfied expression that when she repaired to the closet for her hat, he picked up the volume curiously.

"'Personality — and How to Develop It,' " he scoffed. "What makes you read such cheap piffle?"

"It's splendid!" she refuted. "It seems to take me out of myself so."

He forbore his sarcasms indulgently. "If it does that, I'm all for it."

They issued forth toward the street-car.

"Ruby still on the mend?" she asked.

They avoided hidden implications by common consent.

"Yes," he divulged. "She'll be around the house again in a few more days. The doctor has never seen any one get well so fast."

He had come to count on Winifred in these days of

indecision. Her sympathy and understanding were so limitless, so accessible to his needs.

"I'm *very* happy tonight," she told him. "Things seem to be coming my way lately."

"It's about time." He smiled kindly. "I never saw you looking so well."

It was really true. She was even dressed with some taste.

"I like my new position," she expatiated. "And did I tell you about the second dividend check from Saul Sherbondy?"

He darkened a little at that. It was mortifying that her investment in the weighing-scale business, contrary to his predictions, should be proving so fortunate.

"Another thousand dollars!" Her jubilation coaxed a reluctant grin from him. "And he says he's going to pay us back our losses in the petticoat business, before the end of the year."

"I expect you and Saul 'll be coming to me one of these days and announcing your engagement," he bantered.

To his surprise she did not laugh. "Hardly. The Zell marriage record is not very reassuring." Once on the forbidden topic, she could not desist. "Are you going to New York with Inez?"

He shook his head wearily. "Let's not talk about that tonight."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"How could I?" he broke out.

"Well, why can't you? Is it money? You can

borrow from me. I haven't the slightest use for what I have. Is it duty? Ruby doesn't care for you, doesn't understand you. She's broken the contract by not loving you or honouring you — to say nothing of not obeying you. And look how she opposed your taking up singing again — when everybody else can see that's what you were born for."

"I suppose it is a sense of duty," he reflected candidly. "I'll admit I'm not happy or satisfied — though I always supposed I was, till you and Aubrey Milhollin started prodding me."

"And until Inez appeared."

He went on, without challenging her:

"I'll admit I've not done anything brilliant with my life, that perhaps I'm slowly going to seed. I won't deny being bored by my work — being happy when I sing. I feel I can put myself into my singing, but not into administering dead men's estates. All right. But I'd rather be a second-rate trust officer than a second-rate singer. A second-rate male singer is a sad bird. And the game's too precarious."

"For heaven's sake, why not have the nerve to do the thing you really want to do," she demanded with impatience, "instead of worrying about whether you'll make good? People who've enough nerve to take a chance usually succeed, I notice. You aren't going to starve, you know. You can certainly sing well enough to earn your bread and butter."

"Listen, Winifred: there are millions of people who never even see New York, who stay home, stick to their jobs and live happy lives. Has a man got to go kiting

down to New York after some fool mirage, or else be a failure?"

"Oh, New York! That isn't it. I don't care where you go, as long as you get out of this place. As for the millions — most of them stay home because they're afraid to leave. If you were happy here, I wouldn't say a word. There's your answer: you aren't, and you never will be."

His smile was weak. "You're a fine sister, to be urging your brother to desert his wife and family to go rainbow-chasing."

But she was too much in earnest. "I'm trying to make up for not having been a real sister to you before. If I could only make you see, I believe I'd die happy."

A voice above their table descended: "What's all this about dying?"

They looked up in quick consternation and recognized Alfred Lucius, smiling broadly.

"More war talk, I'll be bound," he probed.

Avery, in his relief, laughed. "You're so rabid on the war stuff yourself you think everybody else is the same way."

Lucius declined to join them. His face rapidly became serious; he looked tired.

"Laugh if you want, but you'd much better be thinking what branch of the service you'll join up with."

To divert him, Winifred asked about Margaret.

"She's in New York."

"In New York!" Avery was startled.

Alfred's look became slightly belligerent.

"Sure — why not?"

"I hadn't heard Ruby say a word about it," Avery eluded.

A certain depression remained with him after his brother-in-law passed on. Coincidentally, Winifred followed the obvious associations of New York and began talking about Aubrey Milhollin. He eyed her closely.

But she fell to recalling Aubrey as a small boy — and then the world of Beech Street.

He forced himself to forget his moodiness. "Do you remember the time you rescued me from the Micks?"

Her face betrayed bewilderment.

"I just stood there, sort of paralysed, as usual, and you dashed in and sent the whole gang running for dear life — especially Aloysius. You were always quicker-witted than I; always had more courage."

Their mutual reminiscences brought them joyously *en rapport* once more.

"It's been the nicest evening of my life," Winifred sighed when they stood up at last to go. He liked afterward to believe it was really so.

As they stood in the deserted street outside, waiting for their street-car, Avery became aware of the thundering of automobile motors. His incurious eye noted the tumultuous approach of a machine; behind it, a second, drawing up on the first.

Then he turned and looked down at Winifred. They regarded one another blissfully, dependently — each drawing strength from the other, each giving out reassurance to the other.

He saw a sudden white glare on her face — in her wide-open eyes, an urgent alarm. Turning his head, he perceived that the second machine, in the effort to pass the first, had swerved out from the rear, and was cutting directly in upon the safety zone where Winifred and he stood.

Two or three quick steps would carry him out of its path. But a great indecisiveness paralysed him; he could not move, but remained on the spot stupidly, dully — like a jacked deer.

He felt himself pushed backward by an incredible thrust upon his chest. He saw — just as he stumbled and fell — the face of Winifred, her eyes curiously alight with a strange transport of self-expression — as if in that instant she was refuting the unmeaningness of her life, finding release from the oblivion that finally submerges all mortal gesticulations.

He heard a woman's fuddled scream from the motor car, and an appalling impact.

4

He was sitting at his desk staring gravely down upon the announcement of his promotion to the position of Trust Officer when Saul Sherbondy was announced.

"I had the checks made out to you as administrator," the cherubic little man said. "Five thousand from the accident insurance company, and the same amount from me."

Avery mechanically glanced at the two perforated slips of paper. "This check from you: you under-

stand there's no legal obligation to repay what my sister put into the petticoat business?"

Sherbondy breathed noisily through his front teeth; he seemed increasingly short of breath. "Sure — it's a debt of honour. I'll be paying you back too, in another month or so."

Avery's sad face revealed faint interest. "Don't inconvenience yourself, Saul."

"No inconvenience. We got three thousand weighing-machines placed already. I, personally, am making over one hundred dollars a day."

His unspiritual face became almost fine with penetrating regret. "The thing that hits me hardest, old man, is that your sister couldn't live to enjoy some of the money that stock of hers is going to make. By God, my boy, there was a white woman! And she trusted me."

He went on, after a moment:

"But there's no one else I'd sooner make money for than you, Avery. Believe me, that stock is going to make you a rich man."

After his friend had gone, Avery continued his pre-occupied stare at his desk. The two checks, with their connotation of grateful affluence, wrought in him a species of shamefacedness. He had been deeply affected by Winifred's tragic death; yet now he was aware of an intolerable feeling of having profited enormously thereby.

That was absurd, of course — just as it was absurd, in a way, to bewail the shocking circumstances of the fatal accident. To have been run down and killed by

a drunken crew of automobile salesmen and chorus girls was not a pretty fate; yet Avery knew in the depths of his heart that final instant of rapturous self-immolation must have been the happiest of her life, the mountain-peak of her misunderstood, baffled existence. No, the hurt lay elsewhere: in the tragic waste of all that fine and vivid something in her that was never allowed to come forth. Her inexpressiveness — the impression she usually gave of gasping for air — might have been assuaged, he clearly saw. The blame rested upon three persons: Herman Zell, the foolish; Agatha Zell, the blind; and Avery Zell — he confessed it — the indifferent.

With a sigh he rose from his desk, took his straw hat and left the office. On the way out, he was halted several times by congratulations; his fellow-employees seemed very genuine in their pleasure over his promotion.

He turned in at a downtown jewelry store and asked to see the display of bracelets. It was the ninth day of September, he remembered; a month from now, Ruby and he would have been married exactly eight years. On this day, each month, he always brought her some small gift.

With secret irony he chose the gaudiest bracelet on the tray. At first, he had sent her flowers; then he had learned that what really pleased her most was some piece of showy jewellery. This coruscating bracelet would delight her incredibly. He could not have afforded it a month ago; but this afternoon he purchased it with careless disregard.

He was mounting the stone steps of his home when the front door opened and Margaret Lucius let herself out.

"Hello!" he said. She must have just gotten back. He realized and paid tribute to her extremely attractive face; and some dim masculine perception was aware of the smartness of the new suit she wore.

She did not answer. An exceedingly significant look passed between them. Margaret's small full lips seemed ever so faintly defiant.

"She knows I know."

She recovered herself at once, and passed by him with some light exchange.

He reflected, as he unlocked the door, that neither of them had mentioned the trip to New York. His heart sank. He had always liked Margaret; she was very pretty and very clever. She had a quick, darting mind. The two of them enjoyed a delightful affinity of intellection.

"Too bad, too bad." He shook his head as he hung up his hat. "It doesn't pay — really. Unhappiness, sooner or later."

Ruby came out of the kitchen, followed by Avery, Junior, clutching her skirt. She wore a calico wrapper, spotted and soiled. Her hair was stringy.

"Why so early?" she demanded.

Both she and little Avery held half-eaten slices of cold ham in their fingers. The little boy's face was greasy.

The sight revolted him; she wasn't even an efficient mother any more. He left the jeweller's box on the

dining-room table, and without a word started for the stairs.

"Did you see the architect?" she importuned.

He could hardly trust himself to a brief negative. He reached his bedroom, closed the door and sat down, his elbows on his knees, his hands pressing his temples.

Winifred had not been dead three weeks, yet this wife of his could think only of new houses, new servants, a motor car. It wasn't decent. He could never forget her sole commentary on the fatal accident: "What on earth made her so slow?"

Slow!

Feeding a child cold ham between meals!

"It's really too much," he groaned, and his distaste reached its crest. "I can't stand it any longer."

He heard her squeal of surprise over the gaudy bracelet.

Chapter Three: The Choice

I

C ISOLDE was much too fat, and Tristan forced his voice continuously, after the manner of all Teutonic tenors; but the massed blacks of the ~~urban~~ setting were so beautiful and the music itself so indelibly lovely that Inez found his hand and gripped it hard. When the act came to an end and the lights welled up, her eyes were full of tears.

They were in the rear of the balcony, the most inconspicuous place in the theatre. Instinctively, he glanced quickly about once more. Then he felt ashamed. Inez, still wistful with the enchantment of the opera, gave no apprehensive thought to her surroundings. Since their moment of understanding in the little studio, she seemed to have taken things for granted, to have grown placidly quiescent. Contentment was in her face habitually. She evinced no doubts, no apprehensions.

Not alone unworthy was his disquietude against recognition, but absurd, in the bargain. He would not have suggested an opera matinée, even a week ago. Now nothing mattered much. Today was Wednesday. On Friday afternoon, they would be on their way to New York. They had their tickets, their Pullman reservations.

His own preparations, more complicated than hers, he had effected with meticulous care. Ruby was in Bryant for a few days, completely steeped in her merciful self-blindness, more than ever anaesthetized by the last few fripperies he had given her. Avery Junior, was safe in the custody of Margaret. In his desk at the trust company reposed two documents: one a brief letter of advice to his wife; the other a deed of trust covering most of his property. This instrument he purposed delivering Friday morning to Sherbondy, as Trustee. The few belongings he intended taking with him lay carefully assembled, ready for packing.

The curtain rose on the final scene. In spite of all his well-ordered reasoning, in spite of his spiritual serenity, he recognized a silly gratefulness at the access of darkness. What an ineffable relief the exodus to New York would bring! There they might be together openly and without qualm.

Inez leaned forward to catch the first announcement of the Liebestod. He could remark the contour of her profile, so exempt from mere prettiness, so eloquent of nobility. She was still unfathomable to him. The reserves she suggested were immeasurable. He thanked some divinity devoutly that she could be so silent, that she was not voluble, not shrill. Her strength, her force, were past dispute; she was all singlemindedness, all convergence; dispersal never debilitated her purpose.

In comparison, he sometimes felt himself weak. The same old sense of unreality persisted in him. At intervals, when he assured himself that within three

days he would be beginning a new existence, his inner consciousness sardonically retorted: "It will never be. You beguile yourself with dreams."

Even the proximity of two thousand people could not convince him of actuality, as Inez and he slowly made their way toward the theatre exits. It seemed quite beyond him to focus his blurred faculties.

A block further on, where the crowds were beginning to disassemble, a small boy suddenly darted across their path and stopped in front of him.

He saw it was his son.

"Here's father!" Avery, Junior, shouted to some one. His smile was confident, trustful.

Acute, helpless exasperation suffused Avery, Senior. He had an impulse to brush the boy from his path.

He said sharply:

"Run along now — don't bother me!"

His son's face fell. He retreated a little.

Then Avery saw Margaret a few feet away, surveying him with a look of odd satisfaction. He thought she winked at him.

His mind, fingering over the afternoon's *contretemps* uneasily and with a sense of premonition, dipped down all of a sudden and plucked forth the Deadly Parallel. The physical reaction was so sharp he found himself sitting up in bed and staring through the obscurity of his bedroom.

"Git out-a here, you little brat!"

He heard his father's savage execration, saw vividly Herman Zell's angry countenance. For one instant he

was a nine-year-old boy once more, suffering anew the humiliation that hung over and blighted all those days.

The Eternal Recurrence!

He was trembling, he discovered. . . .

If only he were not so alone! If only he could have gone into his son's room and looked at him, sleeping.

2

"I'm not going," he said at once.

His face must have told her, even before he spoke.

She seemed about to sit down on the piano bench, but with a perceptible effort of the will, remained standing. For that he glorified her. Ruby would have sunk into the nearest chair.

He raised his despairing eyes to her face. "I can't."

"Why?" Inez' voice was low and already self-possessed; its tone held the lovely texture that always captivated him. But her features seemed a little indistinct, slightly blurred.

He himself sat down then. He found it intensely hard to explain adequately, to picture the Parallel to her.

Inez stood looking out of the window of the studio, stripped now of all her belongings.

He heard her say:

"I'm afraid I didn't consider your duty to any one. I could see how things were getting to be between us. I was aware what was going to happen — that we should wake up some fine day to find ourselves in love. Unless I prevented it. The only question I ever strug-

gled over was whether or not to prevent it. I didn't want love. I felt it might keep me from doing the thing I want, most of all. You can guess what happened: I was foolish enough to decide I could have both."

She was speaking very slowly, dispassionately.

"I must be a very odd sort of woman. I know I am. It never occurred to me I was doing a wrong thing to — to Mrs. Zell. As long anyway, as I wasn't trying to persuade you, against your will. If we loved each other — if we could thereby make one another finer, more expressive instruments — well, that was the answer. I couldn't help seeing how you felt this summer, when she got better, unexpectedly. To me, it could have made no difference: I would just as soon go to New York with Avery Zell, married, as with Avery Zell, a widower. All I cared about was to be sure we had found the real thing. A Great Love, or none at all."

One might have supposed she had discovered — outside the window, in the September sunshine — some fascinating and novel spectacle.

"I overlooked your son. As far as I'm concerned, I don't believe he makes any difference, either. But the choice must rest with you."

It was as if he were pleading with her to turn around and say she understood. "If I go, my son will have an unhappy, abnormal childhood. If I stay, I can help him. It all comes down to my chance against his. I'm half-way through life. He's just beginning."

"It's Destiny. We must bow to it."

"What shall you do?" he asked.

Inez spoke again:

"Go on, by myself. Love would stagnate, if I stayed. One must earn love, I suppose — must deserve it by one's deeds. Love unfulfilled is infinitely better than love cheapened. So long as I can live up to the best that's in me, I shall continue to love you."

She stooped quickly and kissed him.

3

Almost directly over his head, the factory whistle still participated hoarsely in the slowly diminishing pandemonium. Its deep-throated blasts betokened an activity within the enormous munitions plant that did not as a matter of fact exist. The whistle, indeed, offered the sole semblance of life. When the first news of the armistice had come, half an hour before, the eight thousand employees — machine hands, unskilled labourers, foremen, office force — had swarmed forth from the doors with exultant shouts, like children from school. Empty trucks appeared like magic, instantly to be overloaded with cheering workers and pass from view. Nearly every truck promptly acquired some device for noise-making; a limp effigy, labelled "Kaiser Bill," dragged forth from its hiding-place, was attached to the rear of one vehicle; when no more satisfactory and deafening apparatus could be achieved, the truck-drivers contrived a terrific, staccato back-firing.

Only a handful of the more sedate and conscientious remained. In the small, disorderly room on the third

floor, the door of which bore the information: "U. S. Army — Ordnance Department," Avery was the solitary survivor.

Not because he was conscientious, however. Devotion to his new work no longer kept him at his desk after hours. He had accepted the commission as first lieutenant that Saul Sherbondy had tendered him three months before, not because he anticipated either a patriotic thrill or a consuming interest in compiling munition records, but because he felt a desire to be doing something useful in the prosecution of the war. The younger set at the Fidelity Trust Company one by one had gone into service. Two of them had been wounded; another, from Avery's own department, had been killed at Belleau Wood. Actualities like these build up a slow pressure. Avery was well beyond the age limit of the first draft. He had a family wholly dependent upon him; in the second draft, he was classified under "IV-A." Ruby, though rabidly impatient for the country's participation in the war, bridled indignantly whenever he broached the matter of enlistment. The invisible pressure nevertheless continued to tighten. Men not much younger than he were on active duty. Alfred Lucius, one of the earliest advocates of preparedness, had gotten himself inducted into the air service, by dint of some unexplained legerdemain about his age; he had actually been in France, but was now ingloriously cooling his heels as an instructor at a near-by flying field.

Avery finally wrote Sherbondy, who had rushed off to Washington to see his Senator even before the dec-

laration of war, and was now a lieutenant-colonel. Within a week, he had been tendered his commission.

"Well — if you can be an officer right away, and not have to run any risk, you can take it," Ruby had consented. The pride she displayed to her friends was astounding to him.

But to Avery, the entry into military life represented merely a change in the kind of the work he did. His new functions were considerably more mechanical than those at the trust company; it seemed to him he had become a rubber stamp. He sometimes scoffed openly at the inefficiency of the Ordnance Department's routine. One-half of the men in his office could have been dispensed with.

The news of the armistice left him unmoved. He would be glad to get back to the trust company and civilian clothes. Once the novelty had departed, he didn't like his new uniform. It was too tight.

That absurd whistle overhead annoyed him. The sound vibrated through his office. He wanted to sit down and rest, but he could not. He glanced at his wrist-watch. In fifteen minutes Sherbondy, in the city for a brief tour of inspection, would appear — unless he, too, had been drawn into the maelstrom of humanity that must by now be swirling through the downtown streets.

Suddenly the vibrations ceased. The contrasting silence seemed stupendous. All the other whistles, save one faint treble piping from miles away, had succumbed. Even the engineers in boiler-shops were finding the holiday fever contagious.

Avery breathed a sigh of relief, sat down at his oak desk and lighted a cigar. The opportunity for a blessed interval of quiet self-awareness seemed quite the most desirable gift of the gods. He had not the faintest inclination to lose himself in the mad world outside. The hope took root within him that Sherbondy might have given up the idea of coming out to the plant.

Once his mind had subsided into introspection, he drew out the letter from Inez Copeland that had reached him in the morning's mail. She was an unpunctual correspondent; her letters came at long intervals; he always saved the reading of them for the right mood.

He unfolded the sheets, and read:

CINCINNATI, O., Nov. 5, 1918

My Dearest:

I am enclosing two newspaper clippings, reviewing our first performance here last night. I really love "Aida," just as I loathe "Rigoletto," "Lucia," and most of the other old war-horses we have to tickle the public taste with. The references to Inez Dryden—in other words, me—are quite favourable, you will observe—though Amneris is hardly a grateful rôle.

This is our third week out, and I feel myself almost a professional opera singer. The Bembo Grand Opera Company is a curious *potpourri*, I am discovering. Bembo, as you doubtless know, is a worn-out tenor who used to be with the Metropolitan. He dyes his moustaches, and of course considers himself quite irresistible. Fortunately, he is for the moment thoroughly occupied with Cortez, one of our sopranos, and therefore in a tractable mood. The other prin-

cipals are a queer mixture of has-beens and not-yet-arriveds. Frankly, from your viewpoint and mine, they're mostly uncongenial; they know nothing but opera-singing; their ratiocination, apart from this, consists largely of very petty jealousies and fancied grievances. I've found one other American girl, luckily, who's the real thing. We team it, very satisfactorily.

Bembo may be an old fool, but he certainly knows something about opera. He can teach me so much. So I just forget the second-rate hotels and the spaghetti, and remember how darned lucky I am. Honestly, I couldn't have fallen into so good a chance anywhere else, in either Europe or America.

Disillusioned? I should say not! I adore the moments I'm singing, and ignore the rest. Bembo works us unmercifully. We rehearse all day and sometimes after the performance. Thank Heaven, I thrive on it—and perhaps after two or three seasons, I may get a bid from the Metro or the Chicago people.

Aren't you glad I'm really finding all the things I hoped for? Of course I knew I should. I'm not completely happy, though. Sometimes I miss you—

Avery abruptly folded the letter and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Damn!" he whispered.

The footsteps ceased, opposite his door; the knob turned.

"Hullo!" greeted Sherbondy with open-eyed surprise. "So you're here, are you? I told myself I was a fool for fighting my way through all that jam and coming clear out here; yet I had a hunch you'd probably be moping all by yourself."

Avery in his heart cursed his superior's pertinacity. "So the big shebang's really over at last?"

"Nobody knows. One paper says the armistice's been signed, the other says it's all a fake. The Associated Press hasn't confirmed it. But everybody's going right on raising high jinks anyhow. Come on downtown. It's a sight, believe me. We can't get any work done here."

Reluctantly, Avery followed his friend down two flights of stairs. He noticed with disfavour the horizontal wrinkles across the back of Sherbondy's coat — until it occurred to him his own swivel chair had of course branded him similarly.

The driver piloted the mustard-coloured car down deserted side streets to a point where solid masses of humanity forbade further progress. They disembarked and swam forth through the throng.

"How's this for hell let loose?" demanded Sherbondy, already alive with nervous energy.

It was difficult even for Avery to preserve his identity of viewpoint. The spectacle was genuinely amazing. The streets were packed with people from façade to façade. Neither street-car nor motor vehicle even attempted passage; traffic policemen had completely disappeared. But there was no need of policemen. The thing that most impressed him was the mob's harmless spirit. Each face he saw seemed aglow with exultation, yet there were no signs of rowdiness. No one was knocked down. No women were being insulted. It was a joyous Carnival of the People, the Spirit of Play finding innocent outlet.

Nobody would buy the newspaper that derided the news of peace.

From the windows flanking the narrow gorges, men and women threw forth snowstorms of confetti, and long strips of adding-machine paper. Over the high buildings circled and swooped squadrons of airplanes. High above even these a dirigible "blimp" floated with majestic dignity.

"Congress ought to provide an armistice once a month," Avery told his friend. "There wouldn't ever be another strike or lynching in this country."

Sherbondy stopped burrowing his way through the crowd an instant. "Great stuff, ain't it?"

All at once they were on the edge of the post-office square — the very heart of the Carnival. Here forty thousand souls ebbed and flowed with scarcely perceptible currents of motion. Eighty thousand eyes stared upward into the cloudless sky; forty thousand mouths opened to emit long-drawn-out "Ahs" at each new and daring exploit of the aviators who swooped and caracoled just over the tops of trees.

Sherbondy's practical face evinced disapproval.

"Some one's liable to get hurt. Just suppose one of those lads should crash."

"Not much landing space," Avery agreed. "I expect old Lucius is up there somewhere. I hear he's one of the craziest of the lot."

His companion's eye forsook the heavens. "What's gotten into him? I never took him for such a heller, did you? A married man has no business in the air service, anyhow."

Avery weighed his reply. "Domestic trouble," was all he finally said.

Sherbondy nodded sagely, with the mien of one who knows full well the ravages of marital infelicity. "Where's his wife now? Here?"

"She's been in New York nearly a year." Avery regretted he had not remained silent.

The feats of daring became ever more breath-taking. Each aviator apparently sensed an obligation to the crowd to furnish some new thrill. The two ordnance officers saw a biplane some five hundred feet over their heads fall suddenly into a nose-dive. The forty thousand seemed to sense a climax of thrill, the performance of a manœuvre that could not be outvied.

"Great Scott!" Sherbondy cried. A premonition of fear assailed the multitude.

But the pilot began straightening out, a full hundred feet up, volplaned down with wonderful grace one-half that distance and pointed straight for the post-office building on the opposite side of the square.

"A-a-ah."

Relief mingled with astonishment. Avery beheld the pilot's hooded face, saw him wave his hand.

"That's not Lucius," he assured himself.

The "D H 4" zoomed sharply upward, and it became evident to every observer that the bird-man intended soaring over the post-office's tower, two hundred feet high. The thunder of his Liberty motor reverberated once more.

"Good Lord — he can't make it!" broke from an aviation officer near them.

The thing did seem impossible, with the slackening momentum of the plane. Yet upward the contrivance somehow aspired. Now it was on a level with the little cupola surmounting the stone tower — but could it surmount the fifteen feet of flag-pole, and the radiant new flag flapping irresolutely in the uncertain wind?

"By Jove, he's going to do it!" said the aviation officer.

Just as the De Haviland, with a last spurt of energy seemed about to skim over the gilded ball atop the pole, a sudden gust sent the flag rippling out in front of the oncoming motor.

In a flash, the flag seemed to disappear in the propeller blades. A torn fragment or two was spewed out and fell limply.

"His propeller's gone!" cried the officer.

An intense agony seemed to hold the multitudes. They saw one of the plane's wings foul the pole and hang down limply. The plane itself appeared to hover motionless an instant.

Still no sound from the taut throats below.

Instead of falling vertically, the biplane began drifting off to the left.

"He's trying to get out of the square!" This again from the young officer.

The plane disappeared over the edge of store roofs.

Then only, there came a vast low murmur — a slow surging toward the nearest side-streets.

"Let's get out of this," called Sherbondy. "I've had enough." His chubby face was pale.

"Poor devil!" said Avery.

He heard many exclamations. "His own fault," said one; another: "He might've killed thousands!"

Almost at once, it seemed, a frantic, smeary-faced, Jewish newsboy pushed an extra into Sherbondy's hands.

"So it was Lucius after all," said that officer.

Over his shoulder, Avery saw the headlines:

DIES TO SAVE CROWDS.

"Skull crushed," Saul Sherbondy divulged. "He went clean through a roof."

Avery thought once more of futile lives.

Then he wondered how Margaret would feel.

4

He left the annual dinner of the Trust Company Section at eight o'clock, and after inquiring his way of a hotel clerk, set out for the concert hall.

It still seemed incredible to him. Within a few more minutes he would be seeing Inez Copeland again, after more than three years.

And he might so easily have missed his chance. He shivered at the thought. He might still be in the garish banquet hall listening to the prosy speakers — with Inez half a mile away — save for the most casual of coincidences. He had been sitting in the hotel lobby, after the afternoon session of the convention, glancing half-heartedly through the columns of the unfamiliar newspaper, when his eye happened upon a black-typed advertisement:

TONIGHT — at Currie Auditorium!
METROPOLITAN OPERA COMPANY
QUARTETTE

Isabelle del Ferrari, Soprano
Inez Dryden, Contralto
Francis Fleming, Tenor
Arturo Viviano, Baritone.

Even then he could scarcely believe his good fortune, until he finally located her at another hotel and heard her voice, delicious even over the telephone.

They were to have an hour together after the concert. Her train left at midnight.

He reached the concert hall's brilliantly lighted porte-cochère and took his place in the queue at the box-office. People he had never seen before crowded about him; he could have recognized from their unfamiliar faces that he was in a strange city.

He found his seat and glanced through the program. "The Metropolitan Opera Company Quartette." Again he marvelled at the miracle of Inez' unswerving success.

"Of course I should never have been able to do it," she had written him that fall, "except for the war and its after-effects. I've been able to do, in three years, what I could hardly have hoped for in six. Just think — I've never sung a note in Europe; yet here I am, engaged for the Metropolitan! That could hardly have happened to any one, a few years ago."

He shook his head slightly. Doubtless she had been lucky; but luck accounted for little of her rapid upward

career. Inez was single-minded, he repeated to himself; she was definite in her ambitions; she had chosen one goal and given up everything else to achieve it.

There was a ripple of applause, and he looked up quickly. The four singers and their bushy-haired accompanist had emerged upon the stage.

Yes, he was a little disappointed.

He was too far away to descry her face definitely — his eyes did not focus as sharply as formerly, and he had no opera-glasses; but he admitted she was still slightly awkward. Then, too, she was so much larger than any of the others. What he took especial exception to, though, was a certain insincere effusiveness in her manner. Not exactly a coquettishness, but almost. That sort of thing didn't become her; he would have to tell her so, frankly.

The opening quartet, from "La Bohème," gave his eager ears little opportunity to appraise her voice. He could detect its richness, its luscious quality; but these attributes it had always possessed.

She was under the disadvantage of having her solo number placed second on the program — doubtless because she was the least famous of the four. Her song was "Connais-tu le Pays," from "Mignon."

He began to perceive the immeasurable improvement in her voice. Her old tendency to blurt out her upper tones — the song really demanded a mezzo's range — seemed difficult of credence, so perfect was her control. That inflexibility, too, had yielded to the years of hard practice. She would never be a colouratura singer. But then, she was a contralto.

Her voice had gained in power, though he could see she was producing it with far less effort than formerly. Yet, after all, these things were matters of technique; they were valuable solely because they could transmute, without impairment, the glorious quality of her tones. That quality, in the last analysis, was what made her, for him, a great artist.

Even the layman can detect and revel in a beautiful tone-quality. Inez won an instant homage that surprised him as much as it reassured; the applause that burst out had that spontaneous quality that warms a singer's heart. While she remained on the platform, people even forgot to cough. None of the other artists, except the tenor, was to receive so enthusiastic a tribute.

But she must get over that silly habit of curtsying.

After that, his interest grew more passive. Inez was not to re-appear until her duet with the baritone, the next-to-the-last number.

Other members of the audience who sat near him and chanced to observe him, saw only a very unnoteworthy-looking man of about thirty-five years, with a few grey hairs over the temples, and a fixed expression of matter-of-fact prudence. He looked as if very few things could really excite him. The back of his head lent him an aspect of rather patient stolidity.

He was in a highly sentient mood, notwithstanding; hardly conscious of his surroundings, but intensely aware of himself. He seemed on the threshold of one of those rare and precious intervals when one really sees oneself.

The vital questions he was propounding were these: "Inez Copeland has found complete self-expression. How is it with me? And how would it be with me, if I had gone with her?"

Perhaps he might be singing with her tonight, in place of this Arturo person. Perhaps — but probably not. He doubted more than ever, now, that his native vocal endowment could ever have sufficed for operatic work. And if not? Could he have kept pace with her? Might he not have hampered her? And, he remaining mediocre, would love have persisted?

From the potential, he turned to the actual. His wife he scarcely troubled to consider. He felt little emotion toward her — neither love nor hatred. He knew just what stops to play, just how to flatter her, just when to give her showy trinkets. For the rest, he gave her no heed. She fancied she fascinated him; not the slenderest suspicion had ever visited her.

But his nine year old son — had he justified his father's supreme self-abnegation? On the answer to that question rested or fell Avery's whole case. He tried to be impersonal. No, Avery, Junior, was not a prodigy in any sense of the word. His school records were only fair. He was inclined to be too boisterous, too disorderly. He could sing very well, though, his father thought — and he was so *normal*! No distrust, either of himself or his father's omniscient wisdom, ever made him miserable. No other boy could taunt him or whisper terrible somethings about family disgrace.

Avery, beholding his offspring with sympathetic in-

quiry, had as yet discovered no special talent, no definite bent.

"That will come," he told himself now, "and when it does, I can help him. No one shall prevent him from doing the thing he wants."

He loved his son: that seemed the ultimate answer to all doubtings. The reason he loved him, he fancied, was that he had served him, worked and planned for him.

"I should never have felt this way toward him, if I had gone."

The boy seemed now a very reincarnation of himself — of all his own hopes, desires, illusions, aspirations, potentialities. Avery, Junior's, every victory was a victory for his father; his every reverse, a defeat. His son, Avery reflected, was the projection of all he himself was, all he might have been, all he had hoped to be. Through his boy, he might come to know the enchantment of a vicarious self-expression.

His lips took on the sadness of resignation.

"If some one could only have done for me what I shall do for my son," he thought. "Self-expression is the deepest of human necessities, yet no one shows us how to achieve it. Either we never find it at all, or else we stumble upon it — after years of wastage — too late."

Still, he felt strangely at peace. He would never have to worry about money again — thanks to Sherbondy's weighing-machines. And he had found himself somewhat in his work. His judgment had become

sound. Many people depended on him, trusted him.

Quite suddenly, the sound of Inez' voice roused him from his deep self-appraisal. Time had galloped past. The program was nearly over; the contralto-baritone duet had begun.

Inez was lovely. She was not soft; her emotions were not any casual's to gape at; but he cherished a certain blessed conviction their love would persevere to the end.

This Arturo fellow was quite a different proposition, though. His affected posings disgusted Avery; his waxed moustache, his languishing glances, his vanity, his open displays of temperament.

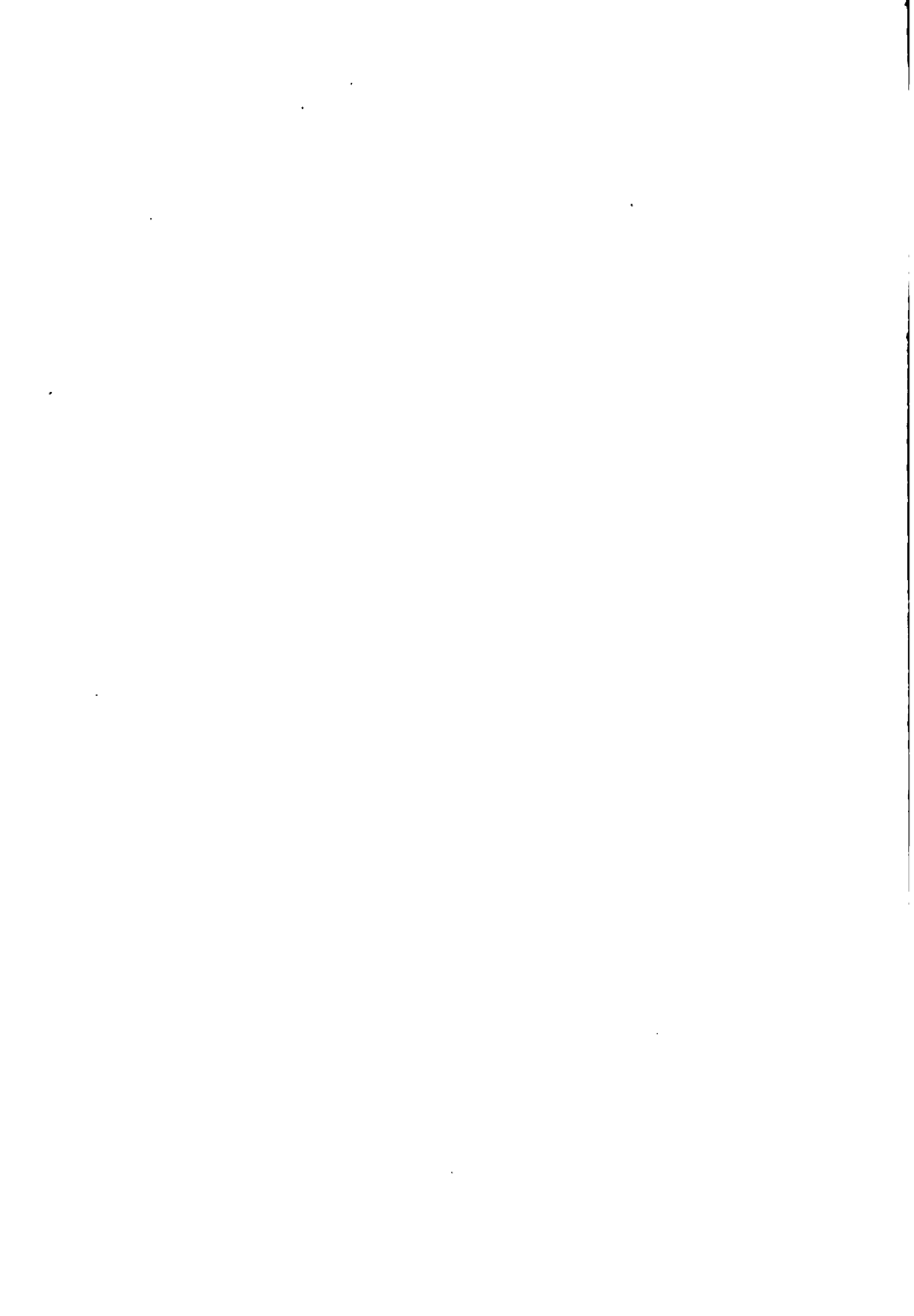
"And there," Avery assured himself grimly, "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

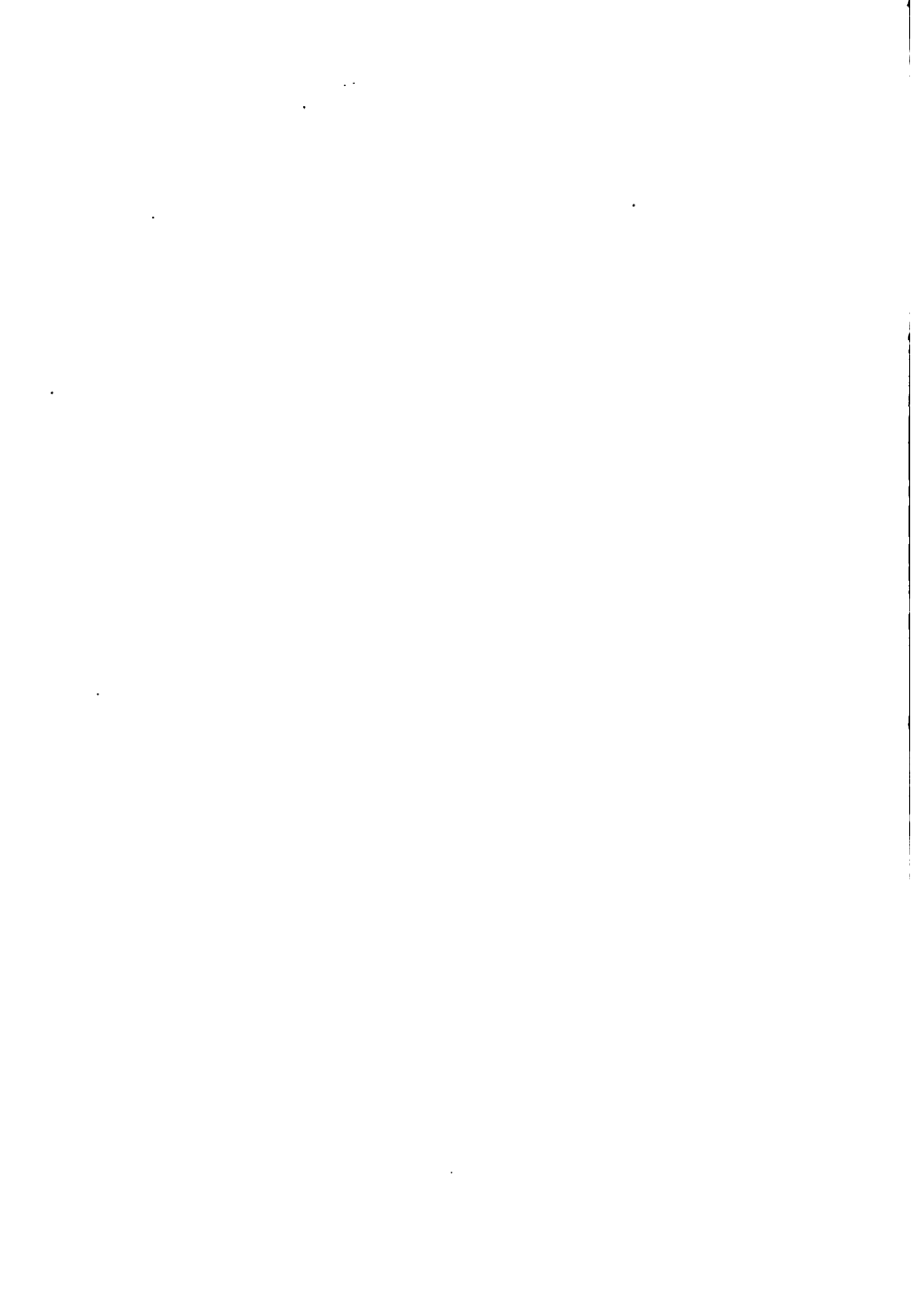
He felt well-nigh reconciled.

"At least," he soliloquized, "I have not strutted. At least, I have not shirked. At least, I am no mere pretence of a man."

The concert was over now; and he made his way slowly through the crowd toward the entrance to the stage — almost happy.

THE END

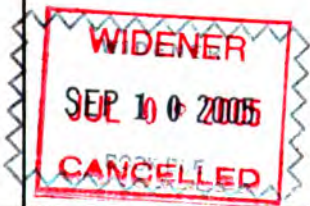




The borrower must return this item on or before the last date stamped below. If another user places a recall for this item, the borrower will be notified of the need for an earlier return.

*Non-receipt of overdue notices does **not** exempt the borrower from overdue fines.*

Harvard College Widener Library
Cambridge, MA 02138 617-495-2413



Please handle with care.
Thank you for helping to preserve
library collections at Harvard.

